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Nik Reno and other things remembered

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To Bernie, Allie, and Kris

Thanks for putting up with me.

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A Loaf of Bread

I have a friend who extolls the virtues of her bread machine. She tells me how easy it is to bake bread. How she can do it while she is at work or shopping. "Just throw everything in, turn it on and you have perfect bread." My grandmother would disagree with her definition of perfection. For Clara Betthauser a flawless loaf could only be delivered from hands that actually touched the flour and had worked their own design into the dough.

My grandmother made her bread on the counter below her kitchen window. That window looked west across 80 acres of rolling Wisconsin farmland. Beyond the windowpane one could see a line of mature oaks that marked the boundary of the yard. Beyond the trees, a tractor road faded from dirt track into grass pasture and alfalfa fields. On spring mornings while my grandmother systematically kneaded mounds of flour into bread dough, my grandfather rolled across the framed horizon on an orange Allis-Chalmers tractor pulling a plow. Behind him the rich soil churned up like black flour. By lunch time the freshly plowed hummocks and the bread dough both rested.

It was there in my grandmother's kitchen, in the wondrous cloud of flour and the fragrance of yeast that I learned to make bread. I cannot apply the term *baker* to myself because that would imply my abilities extend to cakes, cookies or fussy bite-sized tarts. They do not. And perhaps *learned* is not a correct word either.

Some of my earliest memories are of standing on a chair at the end of the kitchen counter watching my grandmother assemble the tools for bread. Out of the cupboard came the giant green stoneware bowl reserved solely for bread making along with the heavy rolling pin.

"Carl made this for us for our wedding," she would remind me, rolling pin in hand. Carl was her brother, known for thirteen handsome sons and his ability to whittle a piece of wood until he released the owl or apple or deer hiding within it. Using a hand-lathe he had turned the rolling pin from a tree felled by a storm on their parent's farm. It was solid oak and Carl had skillfully carved a relief of acorns and oak leaves on the ends around the handles. The rolling pin had been rough-cut by her environment and polished by the family from which she came.

My grandmother was a short woman with gray hair kept curly with periodic home permanents. Her daily uniform included a full-length flowered apron over a dress and sturdy brown shoes. By the end of a bread-making day the flowers on the apron would be faded under a dusting of flour. She began by writing a list on a scrap of paper torn from a grocery sack. For Russell Graff, a neighbor who often helped my grandfather fix tractors, *a loaf of cinnamon bread.* To balance the tomato seedlings Lettie Prell had given her the week before, *a dozen dillseed dinner rolls.* The gift to be pressed into Lettie's hands after church on Sunday. Yet another lucky person might receive a plump loaf, the

crust rubbed with butter to produce a soft chewy crust.

"Once you have a good batch of dough there's no end to what you can do," she would tell me—her hands expertly twisting two ropes of dough together then joining them to make a wreath. She liked to braid dough ropes then bake the loaf on a cookie sheet, the hills and valleys of the plaits looking like fields after harvest.

Depending on the occasion the gift might be a loaf shiny with egg white or buns dusted with potato flour or a basket of rolls sprinkled with tiny black poppy seeds. From time-to-time loaves were put in brown paper bags and left without a note on the front porch of a family in distress.

Next from the cupboard came loaf pans, a glass measuring cup, aluminum measuring spoons, and the flour sieve. I was allowed to turn the handle of the sieve while my grandmother measured, the flour piling up in drifts like heavy snow in December.

The flour had not always come easily dipped from the bin in the pantry. Instead my grandmother remembers having to earn it by cranking the handle of a hand-operated grain grinder into which was poured kernels of hard red winter wheat.

"Grind flour all day and you know you've done something," she told me.

With everything gathered a chunk of fresh creamy-fawn colored yeast was cut from the brick my grandmother kept in the refrigerator. It was my job to stir the yeast in warm water

until it dissolved. Water is to yeast like rain is to soil. It releases the spirit residing within it resulting in a milky liquid that becomes the life of the bread.

In the years before my grandmother could afford to buy commercially prepared yeast she created her own the same way people have been getting yeast for thousands of years, by capturing it from the air. Yeast, a tiny plant-like microorganism called *saccharomyces cerevisiae,* exists everywhere in the world. It lives on plants, in the soil, and is in the air we breath.

To catch yeast my grandmother put a soupy mixture of flour and water on the kitchen counter and covered it with cheesecloth. If she were lucky within a few days the mixture had *bloomed.* That meant it had fermented into a foamy culture with a characteristic yeasty smell, the signal that it would properly rise bread. If the bowl happened to catch the wrong type of organisms, then a black moldy mess would appear and she would have to start over. The haphazard results of getting yeast from the air made my grandmother grateful to change to predictable commercial yeast. It was one of her few concessions to convenience.

Grandma started making dough by mixing enough flour with the liquified yeast to get a thick paste. Gradually she added salt, shortening, warm milk and more flour until the sticky mass in the green bowl was no longer manageable with her wood spoon. Now it was ready to be turned out on the floured countertop so

the real work could begin. Little by little she kneaded in the geography of my flour mountains until they were reduced to a flat plain. Her strong arms and fingers pushing and rolling the dough until it transformed from an unruly blob to a smooth well-mannered ball.

Kneading flour into a batch of bread is creation and re-creation. Mountains rise and fall, valleys appear and disappear and oceans are swallowed up. My grandmother's learned hands could feel the elasticity of the bread and knew when texture and moisture were just right.

This kind of knowing extends to land and communities too. Learning the history and becoming intimate with something causes knowledge to evolve into instinct. By the time my grandmother had finished incorporating the flour into the dough her hands had touched every molecule of the bread. When she returned it to the stoneware bowl it was a perfect synthesis of resistance and suppleness. Firm enough to hold its own but soft enough to yield to the fermentation process it was about to undergo. Over the next few of hours in a warm corner of the kitchen the dough would grow with the help of the mysterious community at work inside it.

Covering the dough carefully with a clean dish towel she admonished everyone within earshot to, "Let it alone," all the while looking at me. Although sternly cautioned to keep my hands to myself sometimes the temptation was unbearable. I had to lift the cloth and press my fingers into the dough to see how much

the surface would give before it broke to the moist sticky interior.

Because bread was usually set to raise just after lunch a nap was encouraged. Bread would raise better, according to my grandmother, if everything and everybody was quiet. For the ritual of the afternoon nap my grandfather, Valentine, stretched his tall frame out on the couch in the living room. He began by watching the noon news, but without fail was snoring softly by the end of noonday market reports, his long thin fingers interlocked over his chest.

I was reluctant about napping but my grandmother would take me into her bedroom to lie down anyway.

"Just close your eyes for a few minutes. You don't have to go to sleep if you don't want to," she said holding me tight so I couldn't wiggle away. I closed my eyes, certain each time I would sneak away as soon as she fell asleep. But the warmth of my grandmother's shoulder, the creaking of the old house, and the smell of sunshine on the quilt cast a sleepy spell over me. I would wake sometime later and find my grandmother already back to her chores.

While we slept the yeast fed on the starches in the flour, producing bubbles of carbon dioxide which expanded the gluten proteins which in turn caused the dough to rise high above the edge of the bowl. Left unattended too long the dough would grow so high that it collapsed upon itself. Globes of it would begin to slowly droop over the edge of the bowl in heavy folds, like

the breasts and belly of the Venus of Willendorf. With a big belly, fleshy hips, fat thighs, and pendulous breasts, both the ancient figure, and the bread, seemed ready to burst.

During Christmas time bread baking included gifts for the mailman, the milkman, and the guy that drove the county snowplow down our narrow gravel roads. After a heavy snow the plow operator often turned his giant orange machine around in our driveway with the blade down, turning a half-day shoveling job for my grandfather into something he could finish in ten minutes. Sometimes my grandmother lost track of the actual names of the people who did these jobs, but it didn't matter. Giving fresh bread wasn't an obligation to any one person. It was kindness made tangible, a gift of goodwill not so much to a person but a friendly nod to the community in which they lived.

Making bread is akin to tilling and planting the soil in that handled badly, no one eats. Both require a mindful balance of good ingredients and the right touch. When you make bread, especially if you bake it in the oven of a cast-iron stove like my grandmother did, you have to be present in the moment. How hot the stove is can change with what kind of wood that is burned in it. Hard woods like oak or hickory burn longer and hotter than softer woods such as pine or poplar. The air temperature and humidity affect bread making too. Dry cool air makes the raising times longer, while warm humid air, can sometimes cut the raising time in half. And one too many pieces of wood or a momentary distraction can mean the difference

between golden brown and burnt black.

As I've grown older my memories of making bread with my grandmother grows ever more clear. Perhaps it is because circumstances in my life have conspired against my own bread making. I don't bake each week out of economic necessity like my grandmother, instead I am reduced to making bread on the occasional day when I can steal the hours from other obligations. Bread-making has become a luxury. I spend weeks looking forward to making the muscles in my hands and arms ache from kneading the bread. I crave the kind of soreness that comes from the satisfaction of good work.

When I think of my grandmother and her bread I consider the way we inherited the grain and the knowledge of bread making. Generations of farmers have worked turning seed to grain, Then bakers like my grandmother and great-grandmother turned flour to bread. Along the way the next bread makers, like me, were given their first experience at creation.

Each loaf of bread from my friend's bread machine comes out uniformly shaped. And each is baked to just the right shade of brown. But they are frail in spirit, having garnered nothing of the maker in the process.

Seed People

In my grandparent's farmhouse on either side of the unlighted steps leading to the cellar were shelves that held a mismatched collection of glass jars. Tall, short, squat, slender, green, blue, pink, and clear; they were covered with screw on tin lids, corks, or pieces of cloth held in place with rubber bands. Inside was the promise of next summer's garden.

There were watermelon seeds, cabbage seeds, butternut squash seeds, sweet pepper seeds, cucumber seeds, seeds for green beans, beets, carrots and five different kinds of leaf lettuce. There were flower seeds too. Yellow marigolds, pink zinnias, pastel bachelor buttons, purple four o-clocks, and many others I no longer remember. Unlike seeds from hybrids and genetically modified sources these seeds were the product of many prior generations and would become the parents of many more. The collection had been amassed over the years by trial, error, luck, and the assistance of friends and neighbors happy to pass along a good thing.

I learned young that pale yellow pumpkin seeds have a sweet pleasant taste when sucked on, but biting some of the others could fill your mouth with a bitterness that took all afternoon to get rid of. Cherry Belle radish seeds half-filled a gallon jar and sometimes when I had been sent to the cellar to fetch a jar of pickles or a few bottles of homemade root beer, I'd dip my hand into the jar. No bigger than the head of a pin the tiny seeds flowed through my fingers like water. As a young girl I

would swirl them round and round in the jar just to feel their smoothness against my skin. I knew what these seeds would become—bright red balls with white, crunchy flesh and the earthy taste of a new spring. They would grow to be about an inch in diameter and be hard enough to bounce when dropped on a linoleum floor.

"Get your hands out of there!" My grandmother would say if she caught me. The seeds represented an important asset of the farm and were to be respected.

All of the seeds in the jars beside the cellar steps were the result of open pollination. In a complicated process bees living in the dead oak tree, the capricious wind, and other naturally occurring agents exchanged pollen between dozens, hundreds, or in the case of field crops such as corn or alfalfa, thousands of plants.

Open-pollination is what allowed a man named John Chapman from Massachusetts to pepper the Northwest Territory with apple trees. Known in American history as Johnny Appleseed this son of an American Revolutionary soldier had planted hundreds of apple trees in western New York and Pennsylvania by the time he was 25 years old. When settlers began moving into what would later become Ohio, Michigan, Indiana and Illinois they found that Chapman had already been there with a bag of seeds. He would plant orchards then move on. The reason this worked was because unlike hybrid seed, seed from open-pollinated plants can be replanted generation after generation with excellent results. My

grandparents were Johnny Appleseeds in their own right in the way they preserved, planted, and shared plant life.

Since the development of hybrids, seed from open-pollinated plants have come to be known as heritage or heirloom seed. Just as the green stoneware bowl my grandmother inherited from her mother is an heirloom, so too is any plant that has been passed down within families, or from friend to neighbor.

Plants from heirloom seeds gradually adjust to changes in their environment becoming stronger and more resistant to local pests and weeds. The vital word here is *local*. The same seed planted in another field, even if that field is only on the next ridge, could adapt differently in response to the environmental factors found there. Locally adapted fruits and vegetables usually have better flavor and are more resistant to pests and disease because they've become intimate with a place and know its history.

Heirloom seeds are dynamic. They constantly evolve because of something scientists call phenotypic or "off-types." A few individual plants in every variety will mutate and become slightly different. Diversity is how nature survives. In nonscientific terms the plants do what every living thing does to survive—they get smarter. They develop seed wisdom. This learning and mixing of genetic material is one phenomena of natural selection which maintains the overall vigor of the plant. My grandparents took advantage of seed wisdom and gave nature a nudge. By inspecting crops and selecting seed based on

the best features of the plant and produce, they did what farmers have been doing for a millennia, *selective replanting*.

Selective replanting is choosing to replant seeds from certain fruits, vegetables and grains because of positive traits the plant and its produce displayed last time. Did one type of tomato seem to wither more than another in the heat? Were green beans from this plant sweet and tender? Did the squash cook up tough and stringy? Could this particular corn stand up in wind? How did it survive a dry-spell?

In this way my grandparents promoted the best qualities of the plant. The seeds and plants they nurtured become over time as much a part of the immediate landscape as the ravine below the barn or the stand of hardwoods north of the house.

But selective replanting requires both work and care. To save tomato seeds my grandmother set me to work separating seeds from pulp. Her favorite tomatoes were Besser Cherry Tomatoes. This variety dating from the late 1800s came from the southern region of Freiburg, Germany. My juicy messy job was to cut the tomatoes and squash them so I could pick the seeds out. Once I had the seeds I would spread them on a paper towel to dry. Later we rolled them up and put them in a glass jar on the shelf next to the radish seeds.

The following February on a cold quiet day my grandmother would put shallow trays filled with black soil on the kitchen table. We would carefully peel the seeds away from the paper towel and plant them in even rows in the dirt. It was my job to

cover the seeds with soil and then give each one a bit of water. Carefully poured on so as to not move the seed around in the soil.

Sometime in early May we would move the tiny plants to the porch. Each day for a week or so we increased the time the plants were exposed to direct sunlight. This would "harden-off" the plants so they wouldn't get transplant shock when we moved them to the garden.

In the garden under my grandmother's direction I pulled out dead roots from last year's crop and dug holes for the tomatoes using a hand spade. My grandmother had a bad back so she stood over me wearing a broad brimmed straw and pointing to what I should do next with a yardstick. Warm dirt got under my fingernails and every hole yielded one or two earthworms that went squirming away as fast as they could.

"Too bad we don't have anybody going fishing," Grandma would say.

The plant was set in its hole. I patted the dirt in around the stem and gave each plant one dipper of water, no more, no less.

"Waste not, want not," she would say to me. Her frugal nature was always at its most pronounced in the garden. Even though we had our own well I appreciated what water conservation meant. When we ran out I would be the one to carry the empty metal pail to the pump house, fill it with water, then lug it back to the garden. On the way to the pump house I could swing

the empty pail in circles over my head. But water is heavy and on the way back I would have to use both hands and every muscle to keep from spilling and having to retrace my steps.

When the tomatoes were in the ground we would go on to the rest of the garden. Tipping my hoe up on edge I would make a shallow trough that followed the string my grandmother had set up to mark the rows. The distance between seeds was measured with an old paint stick my grandmother had marked in inches. Green bean seeds were placed two inches apart. After they were up we would thin out the weak plants so the larger, stronger ones would have the best chance. Squash, watermelon and cucumber were planted in a mound with a crater in the center to hold the seeds. In each one we put several seeds to hedge our bet against seeds that refused to sprout and what the chipmunks considered their fair share. Although we had done our best by selecting the most desirable seed and giving them a good start, our crop would ultimately be decided by the whims of nature. Winds of chance, bees and other insects would take over the job of open-pollination. Our crop would ultimately be determined by the swirling primordial soup that is nature.

Until the Augustinian monk Gregor Mendel came along in the nineteenth century the collaborative process between man and nature called selective replanting was the only way in which crop performance and yield were improved. Using simple pea plants Mendel took the idea of selective replanting and developed selective breeding. To purify a desired trait in a

plant Mendel self-pollinated a plant. He would continue breeding the plant with itself until the desired trait was present in every new generation.

These experiments allowed Mendel to state what we now consider the basic laws of heredity: *hereditary factors* (now called genes) *do not combine but are handed inviolate to the next generation; each parent transmits only half of its hereditary factors to the progeny and each child may receive different combinations of hereditary factors.*

Mendel's work led to improved plant and food production all over the world because the process of heredity was finally understood. Botanists began using Mendel's theories to improve plant production by crossing plants with desirable qualities. No doubt some of the seeds on my grandmother's shelf contained his faded fingerprints.

With the discovery of Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA) in the early 1950s, science had finally named the material responsible for the traits Gregor Mendel observed. The identification of DNA has made genetic engineering possible. Genetic engineering is the ability to identify and splice genes into plants to help them resist certain pest or to produce other advantageous traits.

Genetic engineering artificially alters genes or transfers them from one organism to another. With Mendel's process of selective breeding, the plants he cross-pollinated had the ability to sexually mate with the other. However, genetic

engineering makes it possible to combine materials from unrelated life forms such as lettuce and sheep.

Seed companies have been receptive audiences for the magic of genetic modification because it compresses the amount of time required to develop traits such as higher yield, product durability, and more attractive color. Unlike open-pollinated seed that can be passed down to generations of farmers and gardeners, hybrid seed has a one season life-cycle.

Before the development of hybrid seed all farmers were, out of necessity, what might be called seed people. Seed people are genetic librarians, they acquire, preserve and maintain an abundance of genetic information and material. Just like farming itself, seed saving utilizes the wisdom born of relation to place, task, and material. Repeat a task frequently and you get proficient at it. That's what open-pollinated seeds do. They grow, learn, and do their job incrementally better every year.

America's founding fathers such as Thomas Jefferson were engaged in seed-exchange societies. To help a growing population and assist in the diversification of food sources immigrants were encouraged to bring seed from the old country. This is how my grandmother's Besser tomatoes got to her garden in Wisconsin.

As each generation has become farther and farther removed from the land, we have tended to forget that without the fruits of the soil we would all be extinct. Food doesn't come from a grocery store it only passes through there. The real source of food is a balanced relationship between man, nature, and those

jars of seeds on the shelves beside the cellar steps.

Hybrid plants don't share. They are the static result of artificially cross-pollinating two plants that differ genetically. The two plants can be different types of the same variety or even dissimilar species. Unlike open-pollinated plants whose subsequent generations produce to the same level as the parent, the offspring of hybrid plants are markedly inferior or fail to produce at all.

When private seed companies began producing hybrid seed in the early part of the 20th century, farmers were increasingly persuaded to buy new hybrid seed each spring by promises of higher yields. Reliance on hybrids perpetuated a cycle of borrowing to purchase the seeds, planting, harvesting, then repaying the loan in time to borrow again. A practice that appalled my grandfather.

"Such foolishness," he would say.

The traditional practice of farm-saved seed has been largely replaced by hybrids that deliver a higher yield. But those hybrids have forfeited a great deal of disease and pest resistance. In a hybrid the plant's natural tendency toward hardiness and self-protection is often suppressed. Hybrids are seeds without voices because they lack the ability to express themselves in future generations. This trend will probably not change anytime soon because commercial seed companies lack the financial incentive to produce new open-pollinated varieties from which farmers could save seed and replant.

The continued adoption of hybrids is having another unintended consequence, the dangerous loss of genetic diversity on earth. The late Jack Harlan, world renowned plant collector and former professor of Plant Genetics at University of Illinois at Urbana wrote, "These (genetic) resources stand between us and catastrophic starvation on a scale we cannot imagine. In a very real sense, the future of the human race rides on these materials. The line between abundance and disaster is becoming thinner and thinner, and the public is unaware and unconcerned. Must we wait for disaster to be real before we are heard? Will people listen only after it is too late."

An interest in preserving the flavors of of our history and an urgent concern for a narrowing genetic base has sprouted a new generation of seed people. One such company on Iowa, Seed Savers Exchange, has taken on a Johnny Appleseed role by trying to find and preserve the 8,000 named varieties of apples that existed in the United States in 1900. So far they have only been able to find 700 types, leaving 7,300 varieties they are still looking for.

Other like-minded profit and nonprofit organizations have sprung up around the world, and most have a rather unusual business model. They depend on their customers to plant the seeds they've purchased and then the organization buys the new seed crop back from them. This is how open-pollinated seed stock is refreshed and kept viable.

In the tradition of my grandparents, these companies exist

in cooperative relationships with their communities. By their actions they acknowledge the health of an individual is inextricably bound to the health of the community. These new seed people are reclaiming a place in public thinking about the human relationship with land and food.

As the genetic diversity of the world's food crops continues to decline at a furious pace, the importance of these organizations as caretakers of genetic material becomes increasingly significant. Each time a plant becomes extinct, thousands of years of adaptation and natural selection are lost. If the thousands of varieties of heirloom apples are truly died out, then they are as gone from our world as the dinosaur.

In 2000, the media became flooded by stories about a preliminary report in *Nature* magazine that said pollen from Bt corn killed the larvae of monarch butterflies in laboratory tests. Bt corn is a field corn which has been genetically modified with *bacillus thuringiensis* which causes the plant to produce an insecticidal toxin to fend off insects such as the European corn borer (moth larvae) which is harmful to the plant. Monarch butterflies, a relative to the moth, are appreciated for their showy markings and their cross-continental migration. After wintering over in a few isolated places in Mexico, monarchs follow a 3,000 mile migration route across the Midwest. Along they way they do their part in the vast open-pollination system while they feed on milkweed growing along roadsides, in empty lots, and near corn fields.

The media flap came about when it was recognized that if the Bt pollen was in fact toxic to butterfly larvae then widespread planting of Bt corn would endanger an estimated 50% of the butterfly population. This in turn would affect the open pollination process. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) had approved use of Bt corn based on tests with honeybees and lacewings, but had never ordered testing on non-pest insects such as moths and butterflies.

In the storm of publicity that followed the *Nature* article, the government was forced to do a complete assessment of the Bt gene risk. Their tests concluded that only one of the several Bt corn varieties (Event 176) that had been approved and planted in the United States produced high enough levels of the Bt toxin to be lethal to butterfly larvae. Fortunately, that particular hybrid did not sell well and as a result was not widely planted. Had sales for corn containing Event 176 been widespread, monarchs could have been in serious jeopardy. It was an accident, not careful environmental stewardship, that protected the monarch butterfly and its role in pollination. It is ironic that while science has provided a crystal ball with which to view the function of effects of specific DNA arrangements, we turn a blind eye to the effects of tinkering with that DNA.

When I look back on my childhood I realize I have been given an education in land stewardship without anyone ever saying the word. When a snowstorm or blizzard came rolling across the fields of Wisconsin, I could count on being invited

into the living room to shell corn. My grandfather would bring a bushel basket of corn from the corn crib and set an empty five-gallon milk pail between two chairs in the living room. While the storm railed outside and the fire in the stove turned oak logs into ash we sat opposite each other shelling corn into the milk pail. At first the hard yellow kernels bounced and pinged on the bottom of the pail, but before long the bottom was covered and the seeds fell softly into place against one another.

I pushed the kernels from the cob with my thumb and the palm of my hand, my fingers sore by the time we were down to the bottom of the bushel basket. My grandfather's long fingers and years of experience could twist the seeds from a cob in three turns, leaving only dry red pockets on the cob. Cobs were thrown into the box behind the stove to use for kindling the next time a fire needed to be started on a cold morning.

My Uncle Henry was always urging my grandfather to modernize. I remember him chiding my grandfather for his resistance to hybrid seed.

"Why do you fool with shelling corn for when you could be doing something more important?" He would ask.

My grandfather, always a man of few words, would reply, "There is nothing more important."

Chicken Feed

In my grandparents kitchen back in the corner past the sink was a small white trash can. It was the same kind you sometimes see in doctors' offices. The cover had a rubber seal and when you stepped on the pedal at the bottom the top flew open with a bang.

Anything left on dinner plates such as green beans, fruit salad, bits of ginger cake, bread crumbs or macaroni was dumped into the pail. Remains of supper ended up with other food byproducts of the day. There might be egg shells, coffee grounds, strawberry hulls, pea shells, melon rind, squash seeds, bits of pie crust, or a handful of cranberries that had not passed my grandmother's inspection. During canning season there would be mounds of peach skins, apple cores, beet stems, asparagus trimmings, and the seedy insides of red peppers. Everyday there were the leavings of carrots, radishes, potatoes, cabbages or tomatoes.

While my grandmother washed the supper dishes I took the banquet to the chickens. When I opened the door of the hen house they gathered clucking and cooing around my feet in a familiar ritual. Pecking impatiently at my shoes as they urged me to empty the contents of the pail into their shallow feed trough. The colorful pattern of leftovers were happily dined upon as I collected eggs. I reached into one straw nest after another to pulled out eggs in shades of soft brown that ranged from the

color of sand to the reddish-brown of my hair. Some of them were warm in my hand, having been laid within the hour. Crafty hens hid their eggs under the straw or in corners of the hen house just so I would have to hunt for them.

Eventually what the chickens left in their feed trough wound up on a compost pile behind the hen house beside the strawberry patch. Besides food scraps, used straw bedding and other barnyard waste was put on the pile. In the fall, after time and weather had helped degrade the material, it was spread on the strawberry patch to provide mulch and fertilizer. The process of decay would continue as microbes ate, digested and excreted what would become the next year's crop.

From the scrap pail in the kitchen to the chicken coop to the compost heap to the strawberry patch, leftovers from our table moved away from the kitchen in an ever-widening circle. Next spring some of the bright red berries would end up back on our table but others would be picked by my cousins from town and still others passed on to friends, neighbors or sold.

Besides the compost pile that served the strawberry patch, there was another one behind the woodshed next to the vegetable garden. Fallen branches, leaves, and flower trimmings were thrown there. A bouquet of lilacs drooping after days in the house and thrown on the pile would only keep their identity for a short time because of what was happening in the compost pile.

In a sophisticated process microorganisms fed on the organic matter and decomposed it. Moisture in the form of rain

and snow helped accelerate the process. Left alone long enough even the biggest pile of leaves and branches would relax back into the earth, its component parts of twigs, flower stems and carrot tops no longer identifiable. Through the chemistry of fungi, bacteria, activity of earthworms, soil-dwelling insects, and other microscopic life, humus was created.

Humus is what makes soil fertile. It is a loose structure that both holds moisture and drains well. When rain and snow fall, the vitamins and minerals present in the organic material leach into the soil and nutrients are reduced to a microscope level. This allows millions of living organisms to convert that goodness into plant fertilizer. In turn, plant roots use the nutrients to come full circle becoming roses, green beans or perhaps more apple trees.

"Everything comes from the soil," my grandfather often said.

He knew, as every farmer does, that the life of a farm isn't stored in the granary or kept in the barn—it lies beneath the soil. Sometimes in winter the process taking place in the mound beside the woodshed would create enough heat to melt the snow on top. I could look from the kitchen window and see steam rising from the mound. My grandmother would point out that it looked like a volcano we had seen on television. In spring we loaded wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow with the rich material. It was my job to scatter it around the garden with a shovel. When my grandfather ran the plow across the soil before planting, the

humus would be turned under and returned to where it had started.

To get rid of used cow bedding and dung in the barn my grandfather used a manure spreader. In late fall after crops were harvested and before snow drifted too deep for tractors, he crisscrossed the fields on his orange Allis-Chalmers tractor pulling the manure spreader. A manure spreader is an open wagon with a system of paddles in the back that distribute the waste evenly as it moves across the fields. During the remainder of winter and into early spring nature would be at work producing humus and converting the nutrients into a usable form for the spring planting.

The scrap pail, compost piles, and manure spreader were more than just a way for my grandparents to get rid of waste. They were one of the ways my grandparents protected their own self interests. Good use of waste was both economical and efficient, it put nutrients in the soil that would eventually be taken up again by plants. For farm animals manure on the fields meant better quality grain and hay. Like any viable business, my grandparents were protecting their own production capacities. In many ways the process with which my grandparents managed their waste demonstrated what has come to be known as the *butterfly effect*. This concept says that the flapping of a butterfly's wings in China can eventually cause a hurricane to develop in the Gulf of Mexico.

Through computer modeling meteorologist Edward Lorenz

discovered the tendency of any system, like the weather, to be sensitive to initial conditions. He found that any variation in the initial conditions of that system would cause wildly different results. The idea is that small mutations in the original state of a dynamic system could produce huge variations in the long term was astonishing. Prior to Lorenz's work scientists had always assumed if a cause was only slightly different then the outcome would also be only be slightly different.

Unlike a simple linear process, such as dominos falling, the butterfly effect compounds conditions upon each iteration producing complex and unpredictable results. Each amplification grows exponentially as the chaotic motion of the atmosphere is amplified. Lorenz's computer-generated chart actually looks like a butterfly. As the model progresses it fans its wings and grows. Since Lorenz's work in the 1960s, the theory of the butterfly effect has been applied to many other complex systems such as predator-prey relationships, nervous systems, and even the stock market. My grandparents' scrap pail, compost heap and manure spreader were part of a complex system that illustrates Lorenz's theory of the butterfly effect.

My grandparents knew that composting was going on all the time and to get the benefit of it they just had to agree to take part. Like most other farm families of their time getting rid of what they no longer wanted or needed wasn't somebody else's problem. No garbage truck came by weekly to whisk their trash

away and make it invisible. Nor would they have wanted that, in my grandparents mind it would have been both a waste of money and inefficient. My grandparents' treatment of trash brought garbage full circle.

However, the development of the commercial trash industry has made modern waste disposal a linear process. While industrialization of waste disposal solved many of the health issues that had developed in cities where people threw garbage in alleys and on sidewalks, it also created a one-way flow of trash. Instead of recycling waste back through compost piles and animals to be regenerated into eggs, meat and vegetables, trash is removed from the circular process and made invisible.

A prevailing thought in American culture is that we are freeing ourselves of some unwanted thing when we throw it away. We forget that garbage affect our environmental and political lives. In 1986 the ship Khian Sea was loaded with several tons of ash from a municipal incinerator in Philadelphia. The Bahamas had originally agreed to accept the ash but before Khain Sea reached port, Bahamas reneged. For sixteen years Khian Sea wandered the world in search a place that would accept money in exchange for dumping the ash. During its odyssey the ship was turned away from port after port—sometimes at gunpoint. Before finally returning to Philadelphia in 2000, 10-foot tall Australian pine trees, wildflowers and weeds had grown in the waste pile. The waste was eventually buried in a local landfill, not far from the very spot it had come from in the first place.

As the Khian Sea, the butterfly effect, and my grandparents scrap pail show, there is no simple relationship between any set of elements. Like seeds, little things tend to get big. If I could explain Lorenz and his ideas to my grandparents they wouldn't be a bit surprised to know that disposal of an apple core has such a large impact. On days when the world was demanding too many things of my grandmother all at once she would press her lips together and frown.

"All I can do is at arm's length."

By that she meant she could only affect the things within her immediate reach. That meant the farm, our church and family, the neighborhood where we lived. Things beyond that were within someone else's grasp. But within her reach she could make a powerful difference, she could make a hurricane.

Living on Garden Time

Soon it will be spring, and for the first time in my life I have no need of seed catalogs or gardening gloves or soil trays. For a time I have abandoned my life and garden in the Midwest for a two-bedroom apartment and a skyline view of a big city. My friends back home marvel at how I now obtain food. I take an elevator downstairs, get in my car, drive a short distance to underground parking, then take an elevator upstairs to the grocery store. Rain, hail, sleet or snow I have no need for coats or umbrellas.

In my new life I don't bemoan the lack of tomato hornworms, beetles and slugs, but have found I miss the feel of earthworms wiggling in the palm of my hand. And I have realized that it is not the food I miss the most from my garden, it is the way my garden served to mark the progress of time.

A friend whose garden seeds arrived a month ago, is already pinching leaves from the tiny seedlings that fill her kitchen window. Surrounded by packages of potential she suffers a torment familiar to me, the harebrained urge to plant sweet peas and radishes in ground that is still frozen and covered with snow. My friend informs me that yesterday she tramped around her garden in a snowstorm. I understand her actions. She is trying to reclaim what winter thought to steal.

Each year just after Valentine's Day I used to go poking about in my backyard brushing away snow or ice to lift pieces of

wood at the bottom of the woodpile. I was seeking reassurance that spring had not forgotten its place on the calendar. Underneath winter and below a thick layer of matted leaves covering the hostas, I always found what I was looking for, pale-green tendrils just beginning to push through the soil. I would carefully replace the covering, confident that my dreams of giant pumpkins would have yet another chance to come true. Unlike other foolish people who think the bloom of tulips or crocus mark the beginning of spring, I know differently. Spring is marked when the first plant or seed stirs beneath the the surface of the earth.

Until I moved to the city my birthday had been marked by picking strawberries in early June. Right after that, just in time for my daughter's birthday, came asparagus and sweet peas. When last of the radishes were pulled you knew the sweet peas were done too because hot weather would overcome them both. By summer solstice there was an explosion of green beans and sweet peppers. The Fourth of July came with watermelon and first cherry tomatoes. By my mother's birthday there was sweet corn and enough slicing tomatoes to put bacon-lettuce-tomato sandwiches on the menu everyday. For my grandmother's birthday in mid-August the kitchen was overrun with cucumbers, onions, potatoes, and bushels of zucchini. Apples, grapes, and squash marked the passage of my son's birthday in September. And if it weren't for pumpkins, I know October would have only thirty days.

A sure sign that winter wasn't far away was the sight of withered vines and weeds that have taken over formerly well-tended paths. This year without my garden I am wondering if spring will really come. Can the summer solstice arrive without my picking one single strawberry? When working with gardens deadlines pass so swiftly sometimes you wonder if days or weeks have been snatched from the calendar while you slept. I am afraid now that I will lose whole seasons from my life and have nothing to show for it. Because after all, any gardener worth her salt has red radishes and snow peas on the table by the time daffodils bloom.

The Pine Woods

When I was a child the Christmas season didn't start with the first ornament placed on the tree. It started when my grandfather, Valentine, took his hand saw from the wall in the woodshed and carried it to the machine shed. There he clamped the blade in a vice with the teeth pointing up. Using a round file and oil drizzled from a tin can he went back and forth between each saw tooth until they all had a gleaming new edge. Releasing the saw from the vice he held it up to the light, his calm blue eyes observing the work before he wiped the excess oil off with an old rag. Only then was he able to pronounce the saw fit for a most important job—cutting down this year's Christmas tree. I learned a sharp blade not only made the job easier but it also showed the proper respect to tree.

"We don't want to chew the thing off its stump," my grandfather told me, "We need to cut it away clean."

With the saw ready he took off sure-footed across snow-covered alfalfa fields with me trudging beside. Encased in a winter coat, snow pants, black boots, two pair of mittens, and a hat pulled low over my forehead, I struggled to keep up. I was a stiff-legged mummy with a bright red scarf wrapped round and round her neck. I learned later that red scarves made it easy for someone looking out of the kitchen window to track the whereabouts of a little girl against snow-covered fields.

It was back then I also came to understand why my

grandfather too such care with felling the Christmas tree. The reason was that as a young man he had planted the grove from seed with his own hands.

To grow a pine tree from seed is not a simple matter of sticking a pine cone in the ground and throwing some dirt over it. One must be as patient and committed. An evergreen doesn't begin to produce seed cones overnight. Most types of pine trees don't produce until they are between five and ten years old. Abundant cone production doesn't start until the tree is 20 to 30 years old. Seeds can be picked up after they've been released from the cone but it usually takes two years for the cone to mature on the tree. And another two years before it ripens and is fertilized. Sometime after that it falls to the ground.

Once on the ground the cone has to dry out for weeks, sometimes months before it releases the seed. White pines only produce two seeds per cone. So if you happen to be present at the right moment then you may be able to get them. If you're not quick enough the ripe seed is dinner for squirrels, mice, chickadees and other creatures who've been waiting for the seed to ripen too. If one can manage to get fresh undamaged seeds, they must be planted in mid to late fall because they require the cold stratification of winter to break their dormancy. Planting pine trees from seed is, if nothing else, a lesson in patience and timing.

When my grandfather put the seeds for his trees in the ground he knew one thing--he would have to wait. Even under

perfect growing conditions the saplings would be less than 12 inches tall after the first year. With an average age of 200 years and commonly reaching 450 years old, white pines don't start serious growth until they reached the fifth year or so. And it is several years after that before even a spindly tree can be cut. My mother would be ten years old before my grandfather harvested what he called a *proper* tree. One with lush silver-green needles and branches sturdy enough to hold small presents, red glass balls and strings of popcorn and cranberries.

I don't know if my grandparents knew, or would have cared, that the land they farmed is known to geographers and others with an interest in the mysteries of the earth as *The Driftless Area*. Driftless means that by a miracle of chance the icy fingers of the continental glacier never touched this soil. Over centuries the ice of the glacier had stretched and curled until it encircled fifteen thousand acres of land. Before the mass of ice had time to consume this remaining remnant, the ice began a slow retreat. On the fringes of this area glacial scratches in rock ledges and on boulders can still be found. Transported rocks, or erratics as they are called, from as far away as Canada are still being dug out of the ground.

Edward Daniels, the first Wisconsin state geologist wrote about the driftless area in 1854. He said, "About one-third of the surface is prairie, dotted and belted with beautiful groves and oak openings. The scenery combines with every element of

beauty and grandeur, giving us the sunlit prairie, with its soft swell, waving grass and thousand flowers; the somber depths of primeval forest; and castellated cliffs, rising hundreds of feet, with beetling crags which a Titan might have piled for his fortress."

The common White Pine, *pinus strobus*, is what my grandfather planted. He picked this species not because it met some specific criteria, but because it's what grew a few miles away on his brother Elmer's farm. At Elmer's place he could pick up all the pine cones and seeds he wanted for free. When he bought the farm my grandfather told everyone he meant to plant enough pine trees to last a lifetime. During their first fall on the farm he planted an acre of ground with white pine seed. The stand was north of the house past the garden by a brisk ten minute walk.

In general pine trees tend to be antisocial to anything but their own kind. They often languish in city surroundings, but in a native setting they display a remarkable ability to love soil that not much else is willing to live in. They have a tendency to grab on and make something grand out of a small thing. They can grow out of limestone rock croppings and emerge with tenacity from sphagnum bogs. Like farmers, they take hold in sometimes unfavorable conditions and stick with it.

While a pine can survive on poor ground, their favorite growing conditions are sandy loam soils sloped gently for good drainage, full sun, and are surrounded by hills which provide

protection from harsh winter wind. These are the conditions in which my grandfather planted his pines. Overtime the grove grew thick and lush. By the time of his death it stretched over three acres. The form of the original planting obscured by the years, the pattern and place of new trees determined by the whim of a pine cone and the notion of the wind.

Sometimes strangers stopped at our farm and offered to buy the trees for timber.

"Not all value is measured in dollars." I heard him tell one of them. Many people couldn't understand that part of his income was an ever expanding stand of evergreens and a lifetime supply of Christmas trees.

While my grandfather was planting his pine trees another man less than fifty miles away was also putting in some evergreens. Aldo Leopold, conservationist, educator, and writer, observed nature with a careful eye. He would later become famous for what he termed his *Land Ethic.*

"A land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such," Leopold wrote.

Conversations about preservation and proper land stewardship were topics passed around our supper table with the mashed potatoes and pork roast.

"There is nothing without the land," my grandfather often told me.

There was in my grandparents an emotional and spiritual knowledge that the natural world, as Leopold says, "is a community to which we all belong."

By the time I was old enough to go with my grandfather to the the pine woods, falling snow was prevented from reaching the ground beneath them because the trees had grown tall and dense. Going inside on a cold day was to enter a warm stillness. Outside bitter wind was whistling down from a slate-gray sky but inside the trees stood in fragrant silence. Dead pine needles created a thick carpet underfoot that crunched softly as we walked. Smelling the scent of pine and listening to the trees that rimmed the edges of the grove whisper in the wind, I was certain that no more magical place existed on the earth than this.

When my grandfather and I first arrived at the pine woods to cut a Christmas tree, he walked around inspecting the trees. I think what he was really doing was greeting each one. He touched a gloved hand to one trunk or another remarking how the bark had changed from a smooth and gray to dark and thick. The ridges that appeared were a signal the tree was moving into another phase of maturity.

He moved around pointing out a tree which held an old chickadee nest. In another was a cavity with black and gray feathers from a woodpecker. Below one tree was hickory nuts that had been chewed apart, a sure sign squirrels lived here. He showed me how to spot matted down patches of needles where deer

bedded down.

"See here, these oval swirls."

I could see them, the faint egg-shaped outlines one next to the other in the pine needles. Their heads and backs would rest against one another. Their breath and bodies keeping each other warm.

If there were any dead branches on the trees he cut them off with the saw and threw them outside were they would be less likely to encourage a fire should lightening strike the stand. Once in a while we would scare up a rabbit that skittered across the ground until he had escaped our sight. He showed me the pine trees under which grew Jack-in-the-Pulpit flowers, my grandmother's favorite.

"Don't forget where this is so you can come back in the spring and pick some," he told me.

Sometimes while my grandfather was visiting his trees I would lie on the carpet of pine needles, my head beside a trunk whose clear gold drops of pine pitch had frozen in place. In the cold air I could smell the fire that the dry needles might become. I looked up through the branches stretching like arms to heaven and watched clouds skim across the winter sky. When he was ready, my grandfather would summon me to a tree.

"What do you think of this one?" he would ask.

I knew it was only a formality. He had already decided. He stretched a gloved hand to me with crushed pine needles.

"The whole house will smell like this after the tree gets

warm."

I nodded with excitement. I was already thinking of hanging silver tinsel and decorating cookies with gold sugar. He took me to a place away from the tree and told me sternly,

"Don't move until I say so."

He went to the tree and eyed it top to bottom. Then he knelt on the uphill side and moved the saw against the bark to start the cut line. He looked at me once more to make sure I hadn't moved then with a few powerful strokes sent the saw slicing through the tree. Brushing its branches against the other tress it fell softly to the ground.

"Come earn your supper now," he motioned to me.

We each took hold of a big branch on either side of the trunk and pulled the tree along. Once we were back on snow the tree skied along.

My grandfather never actually decorated the tree. That work was left up to my grandmother and me. But he supervised the stringing of cranberries and popcorn for garlands by eating popcorn kernels that broke while I was threading them.

When I was very young real candles were the lights on our tree. They were slender columns of ivory wax, only about two inches high. They fit into delicate blue metal holders that clipped to the branch. After my grandmother had put them on the tree both she and my grandfather did a careful inspection. Each holder needed to securely fastened to the branch so it wouldn't slip off. And each flame had to be far enough away from needles

to not catch fire. Finally, I was lectured on the importance of always keeping an eye on the tree when the candles were lit. The candles and their holders were a delicate balance between beauty and danger. While my grandparents were never ones to quickly adopt new things, I'm sure they were the first people in Monroe County to use electric tree lights.

On a dairy farm, Christmas Eve or not, cows need to be milked. Both my grandparents performed the milking chores so I was taken to the barn with them. Each year on Christmas Eve old St. Nick left a gift for me on my milk stool. It might be coloring books and crayons, or books, or puzzle mazes you had to tilt just right to get the silver ball in the hole.

On one particular Christmas Eve I after milking we hurried to change clothes so we could get to midnight mass on time. By the time we got out of church my good behavior was rewarded by big flakes of snow drifting out of the black sky. All the way home I peered into the snowy darkness hoping to catch a glimpse of a sleigh and reindeer. Once inside the house I was hustled upstairs to bed.

"Santa won't come if you stay down here," my grandmother reminded me while my grandfather went to the barn to check on the cows.

"Just go to bed, lay still and listen. You might hear him him coming."

So I did lay still. My room at the top of the kitchen stairs dimly lit by light coming from the light over the sink. I

could hear my grandmother getting something out of the cupboard and a bang when she put more wood in the kitchen stove. As she fussed around I thought I heard the sound of bells far off. Yes, I was certain the jingling was coming closer!

"Grandma," I called out.

"You be quiet now, or you'll scare him away," she said turning off the lights in the kitchen.

I lay in the dark under my covers shivering from excitement and fright. I listened for more ringing but heard nothing. Just when I was starting to think that nothing would be under the tree in the morning, I heard sounds on top of the house. It wasn't bells, it sounded like something hard moving around on the roof. Of course! It was reindeer! I lay very still and tried to breathe without a sound. I strained to hear more, but after what seemed forever the sounds on the roof stopped and sleep came over me.

I know now that bells on a horse harness sound exactly like St. Nick's sleigh bells and handfuls of hickory nuts thrown on a snow-covered roof sound like the dainty hooves of reindeer. The way my grandmother tells it, my grandfather had more fun with the charade than I did. He plotted for weeks how he would do it. If he were here today I'd tell him, *I still believe.*

Besides pine trees and magic my grandparents planted apple trees, hickory trees, they put in grape vines, and went through the long process of establishing an asparagus patch. Neither apple or hickory trees begin to bear fruit until they are at

least three years old. And plentiful production doesn't begin until they're even older. Asparagus patches and grape vines both require five years of tending before yielding enough food for one meal.

While all of these things required the correct amount of sun and rain to prosper, they got their true start in my grandparents' commitment to place and willingness to be patient. My grandfather once told me that he and my grandmother had picked this farm because the pump in the front yard brought up clean cold water on the first try and because gently sloped hills meant horses wouldn't struggle for footing as they worked. Although my grandfather owned a pickup truck when he married my grandmother, he couldn't yet afford to farm with expensive tractors.

My grandparents never considered "upgrading" to a better farm. They hadn't purchased with the intention of "moving on" to the next place. Their farm was not purchased as a "starter" or "first house." It wasn't a temporary stopover on the way to something better. They put down roots like the pine tree and hung on tight to see what came next.

The National Association of Realtors says that on average Americans move every seven years. They also say that in 2004 almost six million people bought a different home. Over 38% of them, or over 2,280,000 million, had been in their previous home for four years or less. This feverish mobility means that even if those folks had planted an apple tree or put in an asparagus

patches, they moved on too soon to enjoy a single bite.

In all, my grandparents lived for forty seven years on the same ground growing things like hay, corn, cattle, children, grandchildren, and pine trees. When forced to retire because of poor health, my grandfather took me to the back yard and motioned across the currant bushes, grape vines, hay fields, and up toward the pine woods, "Seems like we were just getting used to each other."

While I haven't come up to my grandparents record of 47 years in the same place, I have stayed for over 20 years in the same house. I planted a three foot purple lilac bush that is now over twelve feet high. In the spring it waves its sweet fragrance all over the yard. I watched a patch of Lily-of-the-Valley flowers go from the size of a dinner plate to one that wraps around the corner of the house. The backyard has hostas, iris, tarragon, peony, and tiger lilies—all of which I obtained through the kindness of friends. After they grew to be too many I gave the overflow to neighbors and any stranger that spoke up for them. I've learned that boxelder bug invasions only happen every four or five years. And much to my dismay, I've accepted the fact that the white Lilacs beside the house only bloom every three years. Staying in one place I've learned that maple trees almost destroyed by ice storms will mend themselves if given enough years. And I've learned one of the most important things my grandparents knew, that given enough time a person and a place will always grow into each other.

Lawn Ornaments

Again this fall I observed a strange phenomenon, orange trash bags filled with dead leaves masquerading as jack-o-lanterns. With black toothy smiles the bags spring up in my neighborhood as soon as leaves start to fall. I've come to realize this annual hatching signals the start of the disposable lawn ornament season.

Breeding unchecked in grocery and discount stores, parents take these bags home with grand hopes their children will be motivated to rake the yard. The grinning face on the bag should be their first clue about who will be doing the work.

For many years I assumed the plastic pumpkins were nothing more than a temporary fancy waiting to be blown away by the first good wind. But after pumpkins came giant purple spiders, black cats with arched backs and friendly green-faced witches holding inflatable brooms.

In the time it took me to say Trick-or-Treat, disposable lawn ornament technology soared. Soon inflatable turkeys, Christmas trees, elves, and snowmen with black top hats began to be tethered on lawns from Thanksgiving through Valentine's Day. The first snowfall last year brought herds of inflatable reindeer in almost every yard. Each one had the same worried look on their face. I couldn't understand their concern until I read in the newspaper that lawn decorations were attracting the criminal element. It seems that some vile felon had made away

with an inflatable Santa, three reindeer and a snowman. To both the thief and homeowner I say, "What were you thinking?"

Although the disposable lawn ornament season has traditionally been been from mid-September to late-February, lately I've noticed that manufacturers are trying to weasel their way into the rest of the year. Last spring a couple who live a block over tied a six-foot tall pink Easter Bunny to a tree in their front yard. The rabbit held a basket filled with inflated eggs and wobbled from side-to-side in the gusty wind. Occasionally he popped up off the ground in a valiant attempt to escape. Sadly his anchor lines were too strong and he remained imprisoned. I know he never got away because a week later when I was walking past he was still there, ears drooping woefully over his eyes. Just as I passed a man came out of the garage with a shop vacuum and give me a neighborly wave. Evidently he thought it was perfectly normal to have a giant rabbit wobbling about in the yard. I watched with voyeuristic fascination as the man plugged a vacuum into an electrical outlet and connected the hose to the back of the rabbit. He flipped the power switch and in a few moments the bunny's ears were standing straight up. I realized the man had blown air up the bunny's posterior and hurried away in embarrassment. After I rounded the corner to my own yard I took a deep breath and relaxed. There was my flock of pink flamingos standing elegantly on wire legs.

Summer Solstice

Old people in my family have always said if someone is near death the turn of the season will push them over—their spirits being too weak to transition the season. This was true for my grandfather. He slipped away on the eve of the summer solstice, its threads of sunlight no longer strong enough to hold him on earth. It seemed as if my grandfather and the sun had both reached their zenith at the same time.

Solstice comes from the Latin, *sol* for sun and *sistit* for stands. For several days before and after each solstice the sun appears to stand still in the sky, its noontime elevation appearing not to change. It marks the shortest night of the year and the turn toward winter. In ancient times my European ancestors marked the summer solstice as a time to celebrate the first fruits of the season. It was a time to light bonfires on hilltops to try and keep the sun from falling to the dark half of the year.

My grandmother had another way of making time stand still too. When my cousin Mickey was killed by a drunk driver and when Uncle Dennis was crushed to death by tractor while haying, after weeping and saying the rosary my grandmother got out the family photo album. It was almost a foot deep. New pages had been laced in over the years whenever needed. The black pages of the album were carefully arranged with corner-holders for each snapshot. Photographs showed newly christened babies and old people

standing on porches at family reunions. There was one of my grandfather and some neighbors standing beside a wagon load of oat bundles ready to go to the threshing machine. He had a straw hat pushed back on his forehead and his face had the confident look of a successful in charge of his world. Other photographs had a somber nature like those of storm-damaged barns and my grandfather standing over a rabid raccoon he had shot as it approached the house. There were whimsical shots like that of Uncle Elmer pointing with a smile to the hole that had worn through the floorboard of his 1932 Ford and one of me showing purple teeth and holding up purple-stained hands. I had just eaten my fill of blackberries and juice was running down my chin.

My grandmother would bring the album along with her to most family gatherings for people to browse through. But during a visitation she would point out pictures of the dead in happier times. Before long there was a group of friends and relatives clustered around the book. Other hands would turn pages and many fingers pointed, soon someone would tell a funny or embarrassing story and the group erupted in laughter. My grandmother allowed herself to be eased out of the cluster with a satisfied look on her face. Like the bonfires of ancient times the photo album was a way of reminding us that nothing is ever really lost and that we need to be thankful for what was left.

On the first page of the album was my grandparents wedding picture. My grandmother, Clara Theresa, stands beside my

grandfather. Her right hand is on his shoulder, her chin is held high. Her bouquet is made of flowers both tame and wild that had been picked on her parent's land that morning. Her delicate lace wedding veil started in small scallops over her forehead then fell to the ground and ended in a swirl in front of them. In the portrait my grandfather, Valentine John Betthauser, sits stoic in a high-backed chair hands resting on his knees and looking directly into the camera. While neither the bride nor groom smiled, the photograph captured an air of youthful confidence along with an acknowledgment of the seriousness of the day.

When I arrived at the funeral home the day of my grandfather's funeral, my grandmother, with her photo album, was already there bossing Pete Ninneman the funeral director around.

"He wouldn't care for those," my grandmother told Pete, banishing a two huge green plants to the back of the room.

"And I want these in vases and put here at the head," she said motioning to a couple of brown paper grocery bags sitting on a chair. The bags bulged with so many iris and lilacs that their heady fragrance had filled the room.

"Of course," Pete said taking the flowers away.

From the looks of the bags I speculated the iris growing beside their house had been decimated and the only lilacs left on the bush outside the kitchen door were the ones she couldn't reach.

'Grandma, I could have helped you."

"I wanted to do it myself. One last thing for him," she

said brusquely, setting her jaw in a familiar way to fight back tears. Then she went to her handbag and carefully pulled out a small boutonniere. It was made of pink tea rose buds and tied with ribbon. I knew the roses had been cut from the trellis beside their garage. She pinned the flowers to my grandfather's lapel then smoothed his collar and patted his hand

"I got your flowers, just like I said."

After Pete came back with the iris and lilac arrangements, we got down to the real reason I had been summoned before anyone else to the funeral home. My grandmother wanted to remember this day with photographs. She did the directing and I did the photography. Several shots were needed from the back of the room so she could remember what everything looked like and so she could see the flowers everyone sent.

"See, he's just resting now."

And it did seem that he was just resting, his long fingers interlaced over his chest as I had seen them hundred of times before while he took his afternoon nap. I photographed him from every angle my grandmother demanded, making sure the pictures would clearly show the flowers she had picked for him. She wandered around the room again and again.

"Everything went so fast. I guess you always think you'll have more time."

For my grandmother, this was not only the first hospital death of someone so close, but also the first one to be buried under the management of a commercial funeral home.

Until the moment my grandfather died, all of the deaths and funerals that intimately touched my grandmother's life had occurred at home. When her father-in-law passed away he did so at home after a long illness. He was prepared and dressed for burial in the same room in which he had died. Then his body was moved downstairs to the parlor so that family, friends, and neighbors could pay their respect. The funeral service was also held in the parlor so the only time the body was moved was to go the cemetery. In 1941 when her mother-in-law died, her wake and funeral were also held in the same house where she had died.

When I was five years old my grandmother's parents, Riley and Mary, came to live with us. Although I was too young to understand, they had come because Riley was dying. They slept in a small bedroom just off the kitchen that I was not allowed to enter. During this time my grandmother's brother Carl, a carpenter and woodworker, came to stay for a week. With my grandfather's help they built a coffin for Riley in the machine shed.

I don't remember the exact moment great-grandpa Riley died. But earlier in the day Father Rieber had been called to administer last rites. For Roman Catholics the sacrament of last rites marks a transition from this world to the next--in the same way as midsummer solstice marks the threshold between light and dark. As the priest slowly walked through the house he swung a censer. Smoke billowed out from the frankincense that burned inside as he intoned,

"Introibo ad altare Dei". *I will go the altar of God.*

"To God, the joy of my youth," we replied.

The priest gave Riley *viaticum,* the communion of the dying. I watched from the doorway as he bent close to hear the last confession.

Later that day my grandfather brought two saw horses and some wood planks to the house from the machine shed. The furniture in the parlor was rearranged so he could create a platform between the windows that faced the front yard. My great-grandmother Mary covered the mirrors in the house lest the departing soul snatch a mourner's reflection and bear it away.

I remember my grandmother draping dark velvet across the platform to hide the rough hewn boards. Then she drew up the windows in the room enough to let in the subzero air of winter. Cold air would help preserve the body. When she left the parlor she closed the double doors to the living room to keep the rest of the house from freezing up.

From someplace giant beeswax pillar candles appeared and were put on stands that flanked the velvet platform. The priest blessed the house with holy water while my grandfather and other men brought the coffin from the machine shed into the little bedroom and closed the door. After a time time the door opened again and the men silently carried the coffin to the parlor and placed it on the velvet. The candles were lit and my great-grandmother took her place in a straight back chair at the end of the room.

For the next three days people came and went. Women brought food and comforted my grandmother and great-grandmother. The beeswax candles burnt down to nubs and were replaced by more. Men stood silently for a few moments in front of the coffin then went to lend a hand with my grandfather's chores. The priest came each day and everyone knelt to recite the rosary.

"Misereatur tui omnipotens Deus, et dimissis peccatis tuis, perducat te ad vitam aeternam." *May almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you all your sins, and bring you to everlasting life.*

As has been the custom for many times and cultures, at least one person held vigil with Riley's body at all hours of the day and night. While no one was assigned a specific time, friends and neighbors showed up at odd hours and took a turns sitting bundled up in the parlor. A vigil was important because it showed the proper respect for the the dead. But it also had a more practical side. Having someone in the room was insurance that the house wouldn't burn down if one of the numerous candles fell over.

On the night before the funeral after I had been awakened by the sound of the parlor doors opening, I crept downstairs. Through the space between the doors I looked into the cold parlor where my grandfather and a neighbor sat keeping company with the coffin. They sipped brandy out of gold-rimmed glasses used only for special occasions. They were going on about crops they would plant in the spring, Bob Grassman's new hay rake and

wondering if milk and egg prices would come up. Although they had their coats on and their breath rolled out in front of them in white swirls, they were as comfortable as if they had been leaning over the barn door talking. I realized many years later that I had witnessed life and death sharing the same place as they went streaming past one another, each on their way to their own appointed destination.

Unlike my great-grandparents, my grandfather died at the hospital and in less than two hours his body was whisked out of my grandmother's sight and touch. A stranger washed him and dressed him. I'm certain there was no degree of ceremony or ritual. He was business to them. Had my grandmother cared for him she would have talked to him as she did it. Remembering their youth, their hardships and fond times, just as she did at the funeral home while we were taking pictures.

A week after my grandfather's funeral I went to grandma's house to deliver the photographs. She sat down at the kitchen table and quietly looking through the stack, carefully studying each one.

"Yes, this is good. Thank you." She told me with a crooked smile.

She went and got the big album from the living room and placed it on the kitchen table. She opened it to the back where there were only a few blank pages.

"I think this one first." She said picking one that showed grandpa wearing the tea rose boutonniere with the iris and

lilacs he had grown in the background. As she worked picking out which photos to put in the book next she confided in me that while Ninneman's had done a fine job, she wished she had taken care of him at home.

"I should have been doing for him. But I suppose it's just not done that way anymore," she said her voice trailing off.

"But you remember when you were little and we had the funeral for great-grandpa Riley don't you?"

I nodded yes. She went on and talked about people coming and going in the house all hours of the day and night. She reminded me that Russell Graff had dropped by each morning to help grandpa milk the cows because she had her hands full. And she asked if I remembered the circle of friends and neighbors who gathered each evening to say the rosary. I remembered. They came after they were done with milking, men in overalls and women still in aprons. I remembered the smell of burning candles, the cold room in which we stood, and how it was warmed by the sound of their familiar voices as we prayed for mercy and grace.

A Walk on the Moon

Unlike lesser advanced life forms I alone fully understood the importance of the first manned-moon landing. On that extraordinary July afternoon in 1969 I was seated by the living room window curling my hair with giant round curlers. They were the kind that had wire bristles as stiff as hay stubble and bit into my scalp. When finished putting up my hair I looked like an other world extra from "Star Trek." I was pleased with this alien association because at fifteen-years old I was routinely beamed up from mundane farm life by Scotty to experience adventures with Mr. Spock, the Klingons, and Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship Enterprise. In attempts to avoid chores like weeding the garden and hauling firewood, I also made detours through the "Twilight Zone" and cross-stellar trips to "Lost in Space." It would be impossible for me to ever forget the dramatic words of Robot warning the boy Will against the devious Dr. Zachary Smith, "Danger, Will Robinson! Danger!"

On the radio that July day the voice of Walter Cronkite was telling me, "At 4:17 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time, the Apollo 11 Eagle landed and man has, for the first time, walked upon the face of the moon." I was thrilled, I had been waiting for this moment all my life. Today, Astronaut Neil Armstrong had taken "one small step" not just for mankind at large, but for me personally. I could finally say, *I told you so,* to skeptical friends and family members. These were the people that had

mocked my faith in aliens in general and space travel specifically. Now they would have to admit that within the vast number of science fiction books I read there might be an element of truth.

I turned up the volume on the old brown radio to not only hear the broadcast better but to brand the words describing a new reality on my soul. I wanted to be the first to hear about new plant life and fantastic extraterrestrial cities. But after Armstrong said, "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," the commentary fell to descriptions of raising the American flag on lunar soil and astronauts talking to President Nixon on a radiophone. Soon they were discussing pockmarked craters, lunar surface experiments, and rocket trajectory paths. In disbelief I listened but didn't hear one word about the vast alien society I was certain existed. Perhaps it was wise I reasoned, not to unduly alarm the public with talk of exotic life forms until they had been carefully studied.

In all Apollo 11 brought back over forty pounds of astral rocks and soil from the moon. Eventually those stones and specks of cosmic dust were scattered to scientists around the globe. Although I've waited with quiet patience, all these years later I still haven't heard one word about alien reptile eggs, metamorphosed bacteria, or even a bit of crystalline rock encoded with unearthly text. Perhaps someday soon, over a long quiet weekend in a laboratory or classroom, sentient life will emerge from those moon rocks. There's still time, and hope.

Clara's Recipe Box

The day after my grandmother's funeral all of her children and grandchildren gathered in the tiny efficiency apartment where she had lived her last years. We were congregating to take away some tangible memory of our collective past. Clara had been the last knot that held us together. Within the next few days we would travel back to lives as different from our rural childhood as fire is from water.

At one time or another before she passed away, during visits or family gatherings, she had gifted each of us with some specific item. Grandma had wanted to make sure that certain things ended up in the right hands. Uncle Myron had received five paper-thin port glasses which had come from Germany with her parents when they immigrated. He had broken the sixth glass by throwing a ball in the house when he was a boy. To my cousin Rita she had given a gold rosary coiled in a velvet case. The rosary had originally been a gift from her father who never learned to speak English. Rita was the only one of us who could recite the Apostle's Creed in German, although Grandma had toiled to teach all of us. A cast-iron frying pan went to an aunt notorious for making fried eggs tough as shoe leather. To another cousin she gave a basket of baby doll clothes. This cousin had frequently earned my grandmother's wrath by dressing barn cats in the doll clothes then setting them loose in the house.

"Animals belong in the barn," she would say in disgust, broom in hand to chase the creatures out.

In later years during one of my many unannounced visits she asked if I would like to have the aerial photograph of their farm that had hung in their living room on the farm. The shot had been taken on a late spring afternoon by a crop-duster pilot trying to make ends meet. Neither of my grandparents had ever flown in an airplane and to view most of their world from on high was a wonder to them.

"This is all right," My grandfather had said when the pilot came to the door to deliver the photograph. It high praise indeed from a man who thought that anything not at work producing food was foolish.

The picture shows new green hay pastures and smooth brown fields where oats had just been planted. Below the corn crib black and white holstein cows are following a meandering path to the barn for milking. Sheets on the clothesline tell me the photo was taken on Wednesday, the official washday. Although not visible in the photo my swing hung from an oak tree in the front yard, my swing alone at that point because no other siblings or cousins had yet been born. Beside the silo a buckboard sits. It had recently lost its place in the barn to a hay wagon that could hitch to a newly acquired John Deere tractor.

"This is so you won't forget where you came from," she said.

On the day we crowded into her tiny apartment I remembered

how when my husband's uncle died his relatives battled over his belongings, fighting over every tired towel and worn-out sheet. No one fought over my grandmother's belongings. We wouldn't have dared. It would have made Clara furious to see her family acting in such an ill-mannered way. Even beyond the grave she exerted a power over us. Perhaps it was because of her well-known ability to shame most anyone into taking the higher ground.

Some of the items adopted that day were: a pocket bible, a sewing box half-filled with spare buttons, a set of wooden crochet needles, a wall crucifix, a pot of unruly ivy, a rosary with red glass beads, a dented egg poacher, soft old blankets, a stoneware pie plate that had baked hundreds of pies, and leftover jars of grandma's home-canned pickles and strawberry jam. Her linen shelf held a tall stack of pillow cases she had embroidered with flowers and bumblebees. There were so many that all the girls could have a pair. We laughed that grandma had kept so many pillowcases for only one person. *But that was so like her*, we said.

The item I adopted that day was Grandma's recipe box. A green metal box with a single drawer, it was pulled open with a metal lip on the front. Across the top was a piece of freezer tape with the words, *ivory kitchen paint mix in back of box.* Inside were her recipes for homemade root beer, depression bread, sour cream raisin pie, cranberry relish, and dill pickles. The top right corner of each card hand been frayed and bent from almost fifty years of being rifled through.

The recipes weren't organized like modern cookbooks with sections for beef, poultry, pasta, grains, soups and so on. Rather cookies and cakes, were filed under C. As were casseroles unless they had macaroni and then they were filed under M. All candy recipes were filed under the letter K, probably because C was already overcrowded with cakes and cookies. Anything with tomatoes, such as pizza, catsup, tomato soup, and scalloped tomatoes were under T. The letter P was subdivided with three sections for pancakes, pies, and pudding.

Some of the recipes were handwritten on lined index cards but many were penciled by her hand on the backs of recycled greeting cards cut to size. Some of the recipes had been clipped from newspapers or magazines and pasted on a card. One such recipe invited the cook to:

> *Try this on your Husband!*
> *There's always one man in every family who thinks it isn't masculine to like sweets. But this applesauce cake always disarms him.*

One recipe for meat loaf said:

> *Extra delicious and crusty because the loaf is a real roast—it bakes on a shallow pan!*

Recipes she had gotten from her mother were always designated as such. *Mother's Meat Loaf* and *Mother's Brown Bread* were two that spoke to the invaluable skill of stretching what you have. The meat loaf called for a pound and a half of ground beef and one cup of oatmeal. The dish served 12 people. Expensive white flour was stretched by making bread with one cup of white flour and two cups of graham flour, hence the name *brown bread.*

Many recipes took for granted the knowledge of the cook by using terms such as *slow oven, some, a handful,* and for making homemade noodles--*add as much flour as it will absorb.* The recipe for making Pork Sausage Links says:

10 pounds of pork trimmings
6 tablespoons salt
4 tablespoons white pepper
2 tablespoons ground sage
1 pinch each of:
    red pepper
    ground cinnamon
    ground cloves
    ground allspice

But just having this list wasn't enough. Any farm wife worth her salt knew after she gathered the ingredients she would have to use the hand-crank meat grinder to stuff natural casing with the mixture before it actually became sausage links. This recipe points out an important truth, the cook has more to do with how something turns out than the ingredients.

I have tried for years to recreate her recipe for Raisin Puffs. This recipe was brought from Germany by my great-grandmother. It consists of butter, milk, sugar, flour, baking powder, raisins, eggs and vanilla. The ingredients are stirred together then poured into glass cups and steamed in a double-boiler until done. After years of trying I still can't get them to come out like my grandmother's.

Wisconsin is the top cranberry producing state in the nation with the majority of those cranberries grown within thirty miles of my grandparents farm. My grandmother's recipe box reflects that local abundance. She had recipes for cranberry

jelly, cranberry crisp, cranberry sauce, cranberry bars, cranberry crunch, and cranberry relish either raw or cooked. She also had recipes for cranberry fruit bread, cranberry compote, cranberry coffee cake, cranberry pudding, cranberry pie and cranberry poultry stuffing.

But there was more in this box than just recipes for food. There was a folded pamphlet which congratulated the lucky housewife on her purchase of Magnalite Cookware—*Your creative partner in the kitchen.* After explaining *harmony of design, smooth finish,* and *cooking qualities,* it reminded the cook that *Only Magnalite ... in all America contains Miracle Magnesium.*

There was a recipe for making Never-Fail Soap clipped from a magazine. The woman who contributed it stated that she had used this recipe with good luck for 30 years.

5 pounds cracklings
1 gallon soft water
1 can lye
Boil hard 20 minutes. Remove from heat and stir until thick. Perfume if desired. Pour into molds.

As soon as she could afford it, my grandmother quit making lye soap. She was happy to get rid of the caustic can of lye, the raw skin on her hands and the inevitable holes in clothes that occurred when lye splashed on them.

A small green brochure in the box outlined the correct fitting and use for an *Orthopedic Therapeutic Corrective Professional Appliance.* The device was a combination of corset and back brace made of rubber, elastic, nylon and a new fabric

of the day, Dacron. The user was instructed to initially fit the *surgical garment* by bending the metal stays to fit the curves of the body with a stay bender. The numerous stays were then inserted in vertical pockets along the back of the garment. I recall my grandmother wearing this many times in the hope it would remedy her back pain. The brochure was a sober reminder that the bending and lifting, pushing and pulling, hoping and praying of farming is backbreaking work.

By the time my aunts, uncles, cousins and I had grown up, we had spent countless hours on the farm. It was the place to come in summer to pick as many strawberries as you wanted to hull or all the corn you could husk. Anyone desiring a new kitten was free to take their pick from the barn. It was the place to celebrate Mother's Day and Father's Day because children could run wild while adults rested, parents secure in the knowledge that hunger would bring children back home sooner or later. On the Fourth of July everyone gathered to eat juicy watermelon on the lawn and catch fireflies in canning jars. And while whichever foolish uncle was setting off the current batch of illegal fireworks in the field behind the house we prayed, *Please let them be beautiful and don't let him blow his fingers off.*

Youngsters learning to drive were encouraged to come out anytime and set up straw bales to practice parallel parking. At Halloween we knew where to find pumpkins for jack-o-lanterns and broomcorn for decorating the door. At Thanksgiving the kitchen

was filled with so many cooks and clamorous children that my grandmother banished anyone not working to the living room.

"Get out of here so we can at least hear ourselves think."

We had all spent hot sticky afternoons picking wild blackberries in the woods and hours sledding down snow-covered hills. Until my grandfather sold his last pair draft horses it was the only place my city slicker cousins could ride a horse. It was on the farm that we learned how to suck nectar from honeysuckle blossoms and were we took in the wonder of Aurora Borealis on clear January nights.

By living and visiting on the farm the formula for our lives had, like my grandmother's recipes, matured and improved. Her passing severed the final connection we had shared with the that piece of land and each other. From now on we would be like the puff of a dandelion that has just been blown apart, we would scatter and float never again to land where we had started.

Divine Guidance

I believe in the forest, and in the meadow,
and in the night in which the corn grows.
-Henry Thoreau, "Walking" (1862)

Emma McGuire was born with emerald green eyes and hair the same white-blonde of new corn silk. When she slept her parents thought they heard the sound of wind whispering across newly planted fields. Some parents might have found this unnerving but Emma's parents would sit holding her in a rocking chair late into the night just to hear to her breath. As she grew John and Stella McGuire would find stalks of corn growing up the side of the house and under the window into Emma's room. Overnight the leaves would curl around her bedposts and creep into her shoes. In the morning the room would have a clean, crisp scent, as if a thunderstorm had just passed through. Emma's mother grew accustomed to finding kernels of corn in places they didn't belong. Handfuls of seeds appeared in the basket Emma used to carry firewood and in the pockets of her jeans. Kernels tumbled out of clean coffee cups in the cupboard and would line themselves up in perfectly straight rows on kitchen window sills.

Most farm parents caution their children not to wander into a cornfield after the Fourth of July. A prudent warning, even for adults. By July green stalks have grown high toward the sun and ears are filled with the promise of a good harvest. Deep

inside those fields wide leaves curve and twist to create an earthbound vertigo of green. Uncooperative stalks can be parted to take a single step but they never willingly open a path to the world beyond. Looking down a dirt passageway between the rows one can see the belly of the earth curve and dip, making it impossible to know which way is out. The only way to regain one's sense of direction is to look up. It is a well known fact that even grown men can become lost in their very own fields. Thrashing about for hours they become delirious from thirst, until at last their wives find them weeping in the dirt.

John and Stella never feared for Emma when she went into the corn. Once they had found her fast asleep, guarded by stalks in a circle around her. The leaves had stretched horizontally over her so she was shaded as she slept. As they approached the stalks slowly gave way allowing them to take their daughter home.

During summer months McGuires ran produce stand at the end of their driveway. Along the fence that separated McGuire's land from the Stanton farm, Emma picked the blackberries that her mother made into jam flavored with sage. Sometimes Emma saw Cash Stanton's wife, Margaret, hanging laundry on the line or carrying firewood. Emma knew better than to wave or call out a greeting.

Cash Stanton was mean as a snake and prone to fits of rage. A cow had gotten the best of him years ago and crushed one of his legs. During the accident he stepped on the prongs of a

pitchfork and the handle came back and blinded his left eye as well. Instead of using a cane to get around, Cash cut the handle off the pitchfork for his cane. Cash made his money by buying up farm after farm then turning all the land into corn or soybean fields. He burned down the barns and houses on those and plowed under pastures, gardens, and vineyards. Cash Stanton reminded Emma of the plants that grew in her nightmares. Tenacious and aggressive, the plants were a maze of tangled vines that trapped everything within its grasp.

Besides garden produce, McGuires sold Stella's jam, red currant pie, sassafras root beer, and sweet corn Emma had grown. By the time Emma was eighteen, young men in town drove out to buy bushel baskets full of Emma's corn. When their poor mothers complained about having to can all that corn, the boys said they would surely die if they couldn't have it. They paid for it with one dollar bills counted slowly into Emma's hand just so they could touch her skin. They left behind gifts of silver charm bracelets, honeysuckle perfume, chocolate hearts, and love letters written in blood. But Emma was both sensible and beautiful. She bagged up their purchases and took no notice that they had fallen in love with her. Emma's sweet corn had snow-white kernels and when it was husked the silk fell off the ear unaided. People eating it for the first time were often overcome with tears because they felt as through they'd just tasted sunshine. Strangers passing by the stand would buy apples or pumpkins or eggs but when they got home wondered at the nests of

corn silk in the bottom of their bags.

Although many people thought they heard strange humming sounds when they drove past the McGuire cornfields late at night, no one spoke of it aloud. Had Emma been born in another time people might have shunned her. After all, with such a knack for growing things one must surely be a witch. They might have tied bits of sweet grass into witchknots and placed them next to their hearts. More than one mother faced with bushels of sweet corn brought home by their lovesick sons thought of sprinkling holy water on Emma to see if she would spark. As it was, those mothers quickly canned the corn then put bay leaves under their pillows to ward off any future misfortune.

A girl with strong hands and sharp wit, Emma knew what people said of her, and sometimes what they thought. But she didn't care. When her mother died she had learned that people should be grateful for what they had. Because you never know when something you love will go spinning out of your life forever. Emma knew that the smallest motion can suddenly turn the balance against you. Leaving you alone to struggle after happiness in the wake of sorrow.

Lewis Bailey wished it had been him instead of his sister, Stella, who had fallen down the basement stairs. If he had come into the kitchen a moment sooner he might have grabbed Stella and prevented the look of horror on Emma's face. But that day he paused a second too long to wipe mud off his boots. He would rather it had been him instead of Emma's mother who tumbled head

over heals to a broken neck. Stella now watched over Emma from the graveyard beside Keystone Church where Pastor Douglas B. Wright preached on Sunday about the need be looking up while you seek balance here on earth.

The day Stella McGuire died marked the beginning of a streak of bad luck for Emma and the people she loved. Later that month Lewis, who farmed the land east of McGuire's caught his hand in the hay baler and lost three fingers. Emma had been outside in the garden when she heard his cry for help. Without her he might have bled to death.

"If only I'd turned the machine off first I might have saved them," Lewis said as he surveyed stumps.

"Damn lucky I didn't lose more than a few fingers."

Lewis was the kind of man who might mourn the loss of a few fingers, but wise enough to appreciate the way his life still tipped toward the light.

There are people who say a person can't die of a broken heart. But Emma knew different. On the day her mother died, her father's heart started to crack. Any little thing would create a new fracture, a full moon, dew on grass, or the taste of blackberry jam. Hundreds of tiny hair line cracks grew so long that they wrapped themselves all the way around his heart and no amount of love or medicine could mend them. Emma brewed gallons of raspberry leaf tea and tenderly cared for him. But on one still night his heart gave way completely with no more sound than a falling star.

With both her mother and father gone Emma began to believe that folks buried in Keystone Cemetery were the lucky ones. They had tipped the balance to the other side and were in a place of peace and quiet. When she looked at the life around her she wondered where was balance when rain washed away newly planted seed or hail shredded corn stalks or high winds flattened oat fields. Where was it when Cash Stanton's plow "accidentally" took out a section of her mother's wild blackberry bushes? Where had balance been hiding when her mother's life had spilled down the basement steps?

From her mother Emma had learned that everything a person does, even little things like sewing on a button or weeding a garden make a difference. Most of all she had discovered that the cumulative energy of every single motion can have many effects, and each decision counts in ways you won't know about until it's too late. All of the motions a person makes is just a way of trying to find the right balance so that luck might be tipped over to his side. Like the day her mother died, if she had only been one step closer or if her arm had been one inch longer, it might have made all the difference in the world. It might have been enough that day to tip the balance, to provide the counterweight that would have changed everything.

At church on Sunday mornings Emma sat beside her Uncle Lewis on a wooden pew polished bright by hopes and prayers. In a community used to the unsettling nature of life and the peculiar workings of farm markets, Emma thought it was a miracle people

showed up. Pastor Wright, whose only connection to farming was through his wife's vegetable garden, maintained a smile as stiff as his collar. When he looked out upon his congregation he saw people who were combinations of wickedness and grace. But when it came to Cash Stanton even Wright's charitable heart could only see evil. Perhaps, he thought, it really was possible for someone to be so unholy that there is no room for goodness. When Wright first became pastor of Keystone Church he had called on the Stantons just as he did his other parishioners. But when Margaret Stanton showed up in church the following Sunday with bruises covering her arms and hands, Wright realized he had made a mistake. After that he made sure the church bulletin board contained flyers from community agencies that provided help for victims of abuse.

Each week Pastor Wright read a different bible lesson about fire or flood, wealth or poverty, salvation or damnation; but his sermons were always the same. Raising his hand toward the arch of the church ceiling Wright preached about seeking the divine guidance that led to balance in one's life.

"The word could come loud as thunder or quiet as a whisper," Wright warned his flock. "Listen carefully and be prepared. Don't forget to look up."

Lowering his voice and looking directly at Margaret Stanton he said, "The way will presented to you. You have only to be prepared to accept it."

Despite years of watching and being prepared for divine

guidance, Emma herself had never actually experienced it. And she was almost convinced that no one else had either. She never once considered that divine guidance had been following her around all her life. That it was right behind her just watching and waiting for the right moment to pounce.

One day in late summer Emma was walking between the corn rows trying to get lost like she had as a child. The stalks towered over her head like a jungle canopy and leaves caressed her hands. The plants brushed at her hair and anointed her with pollen and bits of silk. The smell of the foliage permeated her skin and no amount of scrubbing would get it off. She often walked here hoping that just beyond the next few rows she might discover a different world. A place where things turned out the way they were supposed to. A space where she wouldn't feel like a stone being hurled from a slingshot to some unknown destination. One this day she found a handful of seed lying in the black dirt between two rows. The kernels were clearly arranged in the shape of an arrow. The arrow pointed down the row toward the curve that ran toward the Stanton farm. When she collected them in her hand they felt warm from the earth. They shimmered as she held them and just before she put them in her pocket she thought they spoke to her.

But it hadn't been the corn. It had been a single cry of despair carried across the field and pushed along by corn tassels as if to make sure it got to Emma's ears. By the time she got to the end of the row, Cash Stanton had pulled out of

his driveway. As his truck disappeared from sight Emma ran to the backdoor of Stanton's house.

In all her twenty years Emma had never been inside this house. It was a clean house, spotless really. But gray and threadbare. Rugs were worn through to the floor, no pictures of loved ones hung on the wall, woodwork needed painting, and the sofa had patches carefully sewn on the cushions. There was not one sign of happiness no matter where she looked. Even though the temperature outside was well above eighty degrees, the house inside so cold Emma could see her breath rolling out in swirls as she walked back to the kitchen. Margaret Stanton was standing there with blood dripping into the sink, her face swollen and bruised. Emma could tell by the way she held her left hand that something was broken.

"You shouldn't be here. He might catch you," Margaret whispered, her thin shoulders shaking uncontrollably.

"He's gone," Emma said grabbing a ragged dishtowel to make a sling for Margaret's arm. Emma eased her into a chair and carefully wiped her face.

"I think we should go to my house."

Margaret looked at Emma and almost said no. But, suddenly she remembered every word Pastor Wright had ever said about divine guidance and being ready to accept it when it came. She thought about how one small thing can tip the balance of a life forever. It was finally time, she decided, to look up. On the way out of the door Margaret reached under the kitchen table and

pulled loose a piece of paper that had been taped there.

Together the two women walked through the fields toward Emma's house. When they reached McGuire property, Emma took the kernels she had found earlier from her pocket and threw them back on the ground. The stalks of corn leaned back for Emma and Margaret, giving them plenty of room to pass, then they closed back up again. While Margaret drank raspberry leaf tea Emma called her Uncle Lewis.

"Will you take me here?" Margaret asked Lewis when he arrived, showing him the address of a crisis shelter.

"I'll take you anywhere you want to go. Me and a good number of other folks in town," Lewis smiled. "But first you need a hospital."

"I know."

"Anything else you want to take?" Lewis asked motioning toward Margaret's house.

"No, there's nothing there," she said putting her hand on Lewis's arm as he helped her into his truck.

After they left Emma sat in a rocking chair and looked at her cornfield. The seeds she had thrown out earlier had already grown tall and brilliant green. But they didn't grow in rows, they had sprung up in clusters. She watched as the corn stalks rustled against each other, leaves caressing leaves in gentle conversation as if on some secret topic. Sometimes the plants bowed to one another in greeting. Emma watched them as they slowly moved along the ground. The plant clusters shifted and

changed. Individual plants moved from one group to another.

As Emma rocked she listened for Cash Stanton's return. The sound of his rage when he discovered the empty house was enough to wake the dead in Keystone Cemetery. Going out his backdoor, Emma was sure he would see where she and Margaret had crossed from Stanton to McGuire land.

When Cash Stanton stepped between the rows of Emma's field he slashed his pitchfork handle left and right destroying the stalks as he went. He had no way of knowing that cornfields, just like people, have boundaries too. They reach a point where they seek balance. Stanton fought hard and tried to scream for help, but the stalks grabbed his arms and wrapped their leaves around him until he couldn't take a single breath. Emma called the sheriff's department and told them she heard strange noises coming from the Stanton house. When the sheriff followed Stanton's trail they found him dead of a heart attack in the middle of Emma's field. Some people said later that they always knew Cash Stanton would come to a bad end. Others said he got what he deserved. After all, any fool knows that it isn't safe go tramping around in a cornfield. But Emma knew what had really happened. Cash Stanton had forgotten to look up for guidance.

The King of Dalton College

Dalton College campus was the kind of place where fortune tellers went hungry. Who needed crystal balls when friends, neighbors, and coworkers already knew everything about you. Good news or bad information spread like snow from a winter storm sifting into every open crevice and drifting across walkways. If you got a speeding ticket, had overdue library books or changed your breakfast cereal folks took note. Like ripe apples that fall from trees, gossip rolled around underfoot until someone picked it up or kicked it.

It was common knowledge for example, that Brady Fritz, who coached baseball and crew became tearful after his third vodka sour at the Waterfall Inn. Faculty members thirsty after long days of lecturing glassy-eyed students would pass the word that Fritz was at the Waterfall. It was fair warning to exhausted teachers to go home and drink warm beer to avoid being trapped by Fritz. He had a way of putting an arm around your shoulder and launching into stories about glory days as a professional baseball player. After the first drink the arm around the shoulder closed in around your neck. Before you knew it you were trapped between slurred sentences with no hope of escape.

While rumors of an affair between history teacher Selena Herman and a lawyer from town had died down years ago, some folks still commented how Selena and Kevin's son didn't look a bit like Kevin. But if Kevin, head of physics, overheard any of

those remarks he ignored them. He preferred to spend his time tutoring pretty blonde coeds who were having a hard time understanding relative motion and Kepler's Laws.

Dalton faculty and staff had a common bond. They were united in their distrust of Carlton Snear. Snear was an accountant recently hired by the board of trustees to address rising costs and declining enrollment. He was to assist the current president, Doctor Matthew Briggs, in improving the college's financial picture. Unlike Doc Briggs who greeted each student by name, Snear didn't know anyone's name and showed no inclination to learn. Refusing the offer of a faculty cottage on campus, Snear took up residence in a motel in town.

Snear hadn't been on the job more than a few weeks when a very unfortunate accident occurred. Late one night as Doc Briggs walked across campus he slipped and fell, hitting his head on stone bench. Within a few days he was dead. Before anyone had time to take a deep breath and speculate aloud about who might succeed him, the trustees named Snear to the post.

Despite Snear's pretentious nature and flashy gold rings, no one knew anything about him. Dorothy Weedon the library director tried to investigate his past but couldn't find a single place where he had worked before coming to Dalton. Anyone attempting to be friendly toward him quickly learned that his life would remain closed. Not shut like a window that might be lifted later to let in air or light, but closed like a tomb and sealed for all eternity. Most people got the feeling that if

caught breaking the seals they would surely be cursed.

Under Snear's rule Dalton College soon became a place that attracted the misbehaving sons and daughters of wealthy parents. Freshmen who came to Dalton thinking that they could get the best of their teachers soon learned differently. At the first offense the culprit was brought before President Snear and the massive doors to his office were closed behind them. At the end of fifteen minutes the student emerged pale and shaking. As if by some terrible magic the student was transformed. They adopted model behavior for the next four years at both school and home. Parents were amazed and very pleased.

In the unlikely event of a second infraction the student was immediately thrown out. Although strictly hearsay, it was said parents could buy their darling's way back into Dalton. Snear once expelled a girl for chewing gum in the library, but the girl returned to class about the same time Snear started wearing a gold ring set with a large ruby. And after one especially bad incident when a boy was caught smoking in the library restroom, a sleek black sports car replaced the old sedan in Snear's garage.

The trustees cringed whenever they heard Snear was meeting with a parent, but they were too cowardly to say a word. For every unhappy parent the college had ten more pleased with exacting rules and swift enforcement, and happy to show their appreciation with fat endowment checks. Since Snear's arrival students joked sadly that the most exciting thing to do on

Saturday night was to watch lab rats run laps around cages in the science hall.

As sovereign of Dalton Snear seemed to be all-knowing. He fired a botanist for casual comments she made about the condition of the grounds around his house. The poor woman later contended that the only thing within earshot that day had been a juniper tree. He knew the instant any department went over budget, if a stapler was stolen from the bookstore or if one of the cafeteria workers took home leftover green beans.

Snear lived alone on the far edge of campus in the president's house. The massive three-story brick house was called Foxwhelp Hall. When he moved he brought few boxes of personal belongings but four movers struggled and sweated getting a huge chest into the house.

From the Foxwhelp Hall one could see across the oval commons, crisscrossed with rock paths and oak trees with stone benches under them. Ringing the commons were classroom buildings interspersed with faculty cottages. The president's house had been built by Bernard Dalton, a wealthy farmer and the founder of Dalton College.

Like most farmers of his era, Bernard Dalton raised cattle, horses and sheep. He grew corn and hay for his livestock. But Bernard and his wife Kathleen made most of their money by planting a large orchard with Foxwhelp apple trees. The apples from these trees were small and crisp. Red on one side and pale gold on the other, they made the finest hard-cider in the

country.

Dalton's were so proud of their orchard that they fenced it in and put a wide gate at the entrance. People came from miles around to buy cider from pretty red-haired Kathleen Dalton. But some people with nothing better to do said how peculiar it was that the Daltons never seemed to have bad luck. When hail or high wind took down crops on other farms, the Dalton orchard was always untouched. If apple trees on other farms were attacked by disease or insects, Dalton's Foxwhelp apples seemed as resistant to the pest as a cat is to water. Sometimes people passing by the orchard at night reported seeing strange lights flicking in the tree tops. But Bernard and Kathleen paid no attention to such nonsense.

Tom Avery, was the horticulture dean and grounds manager. He and his staff kept Dalton campus looking neat as a pin, with the exception of Foxwhelp Hall which Snear wouldn't allow them to touch.

"Since neither students nor their parents will be living with me, my budget is better spent elsewhere," Snear told him.

Tom sadly noted that it didn't take much time for term papers and gum wrappers to become stuck in the shrubbery around Foxwhelp giving it a dejected look. A neglected flower garden curved around the side like a child begging for attention and violets quit growing under the trees. The yard became choked with weeds and bridal's wreath and lilacs grew wild and unruly.

The only sign left of the garden's previous glory was a late-season tea rose growing against the brick. But Tom could see that little by little the plant was losing its grip as well as its hope.

Tom was feeling a bit like that himself. As if he were clutching a wall but not really sure what for. He had crossed forty years on his last birthday and had noticed for the first time that his hair seemed thinner and his waist bigger. To celebrate Tom had dinner alone at the Waterfall Inn, afterward Brady Fritz found him and brought him a beer. It wasn't until the waitress served him a chocolate cupcake with red frosting and a white candle that he remembered that he had never really been in love.

Tom lived on the second floor of the two-story stone livery. Foxwhelp Hall and the livery were the only Dalton farm buildings that had survived. Over time other barns and outbuildings had been taken down for esthetic or practical reasons. The livery had been converted into the horticulture building with the upstairs converted to an apartment for the horticulture dean. Tom liked living here. At night he could look past the Dalton gate and watch stars appear above the empty field.

The Dalton gate was the only thing left of what had once been the fence surrounding Dalton's apple orchard. Wide enough to bring three horse through abreast, the heavy gate been deemed not worth the effort to take down. Chest high it was topped with

an image of a fox beside an apple tree. Knee-deep in milkweed and nettles, it was guarded on both sides by ancient apple trees that still dropped sour apples.

One night when the scent of fall was in the air Tom picked up some of the apples and pitched them over the gate. To his surprise instead of falling to the ground with a thud they burst in midair in a shower of golden sparks. He tried again, and yet again, but the result was the same. Then he tried a rock, wadded up paper, then finally a pencil. They all disappeared in a show of sparks. Back in his apartment he looked at the silhouette of the apple trees on the horizon. He couldn't believe what he had just experienced but he didn't have anyone to call him crazy.

He sat looking out the window at the gate until the moon had risen high enough to look like a drop of milk on black marble. It was then he heard metal sliding against metal. Tom saw a figure easing the gate open and stepping through the opening. The form looked vaguely familiar but before he could place who it was an astonishing thing happened. The figure turned, lowered the latch on the gate, then took a few steps into the moonlight and simply vanished. Tom stared in disbelief. He waited, pinching himself to stay awake. Just as he thought he couldn't keep his eyes open one more moment the gate moved. At first it seemed to be opening under its own power, but a moment later the dark figure from earlier appeared, with a smaller form beside him. The tall figure was pushing her along. She made no sound as she stepped through the tall grass and weeds. Tom was

about to go down and find out what was going on when a scrap of moonlight illuminated a gold ring on Carlton Snear's hand.

When Tom Avery finally went to bed he dreamed fitfully of a disembodied hand putting apples dipped in gold into a basket. But after the basket was full the gold slid off like water leaving only withered fruit. A sure sign, Tom thought the next morning, of trouble to come.

Like a virus or love, sometimes gossip just can't be helped. Dorothy Weedon had been the first to know. She had been fumbling for keys to the employee entrance of the library when she glanced across the commons. There was Carlton Snear ushering a woman into his house.

Within ten minutes the campus was buzzing.

Who was she? Where did she come from? How did she know Snear? Ears stretched listening for rumor and tongues waited impatiently to wag. Later that day when no new material was found for gossip, everything went mute. Across campus there was silence in unexpected places. In the cafeteria china plates slammed on tin trays landed without a sound. Books falling from tables in the library floated to the floor with a whisper. Sentences shouted down a hall turned into wisps of fog and were carried away on currents of air.

That afternoon Brady Fritz, looking quite proud of himself showed up in the library and told Dorothy Weedon that the woman with Snear was his sister.

"It's his sister, her husband just died, poor thing," Fritz

said.

"How did you find out," Dorothy asked, miffed because she was usually the first to know everything.

"He just happened to be passing by the gym and told me."

"Perhaps he's human after all," the faculty whispered to each other.

Days went by but no one got so much as a peek at her. Within a week it was as if she had only a rumor. Soon even the most hardy among them had given up any idea of finding more about her. A few folks even went so far as to wonder if she were still alive.

"She hasn't been seen since she got here," Selena told Kevin one day over lunch.

"Maybe he's got her locked up," Kevin said.

"Or worse."

Professor Molly Barron had never felt safe. All her life she had been filled with a sense that it was possible for a person to be walking along a dusty road or standing on a crowded sidewalk and simply disappear. The glare of sunlight on still water, dense fog, loud noises, or the sweet fragrance of wild violets were only a few of the things that might get them. But no matter the reason, they'd be gone. As gone as her mother had been when Molly was five years old. Last seen sitting on top of the old Dalton gate, she had disappeared out of Molly's life like a burst soap bubble, never to been seen again.

A childhood filled with the responsibilities of milking cows and feeding chickens on her grandparent's farm should have quelled her fears. But while cutting pink roses in the flower garden or picking apples in the orchard, Molly would keep looking over her shoulder. Sometimes out of the corner of her eye she catch sight of a wispy shadow. At night when she slept she often tied a silk scarf around her ankle then knotted the other end to the footboard of her bed. She wanted to make sure that if she vanished into a dream someone would have a way to pull her back to morning.

Molly, a woman with a kind face and red hair inherited from her grandmother, was the only local person on the Dalton faculty. Everyone else had come from other places attracted to Dalton by quaint farms, safe streets, and the clear night sky. Occasionally they saw a red fox chasing a rabbit in the fields beyond the campus thus confirming they had made the right choice.

Molly had come back here after college to take care of her dying grandmother. But had stayed because Bernard Dalton was her great-grandfather and she liked the idea of being tied to something connected to her past. It didn't hurt that the pale figures which plagued her dreams while she was away had all but disappeared when she returned to Dalton. They used to demand her attention, speaking garbled words she couldn't understand and tugging at her pillowcase on moonless nights. Sometimes when she woke up in her dorm they were still there. A cloud of fog in the

corner or an invisible hand on her arm that left her with a longing she couldn't name. In the bright light of morning the shadows dissolved, leaving behind a light dusting of sand on the floor.

Molly liked Dalton college because she could remember when the last the barbed-wire fence on campus had been taken down. She had a piece of it in her desk drawer, three rusty barbs on a length of twisted wire. Molly could still hear her Grandmother Ida telling stories about growing up here. She had a picture of her Grandmother when she was a little girl standing on a porch with her friends. Ida used to tell her the children she went to school with teased her about her hair. All the other kids at schools had brown or blonde or black hair, only a true Dalton had red curly hair.

All school children of her Grandmother's age had been required to produce copybooks. The handwritten pages painstakingly produced by students sitting in one-room schoolhouses had a dual purpose. One was to reinforce the current lesson, the other intent was to perfect penmanship. At the end of a school year the finished pages would be bound with thread and ribbon. Molly ran her hand along one of the drawings in her Ida's book. The sad-looking little girl looked like the old photographs of her grandmother as a girl.

"When my father was dying he told me to go up there," Ida would say pointing her crooked finger up the hill. "Go through the gate, and you can go home." Ida would have a troubled look

in her eyes as she rubbed her forehead.

Fox River, the land in Ida's story, had been named after a meandering ribbon of water that looped around tidy farms and cut through lush pastures where cows, sheep, and goats grazed. The riverbed ran beside banks of trees, the roots of which fanned out into the water like so many snakes. Farms spread peacefully into the valley, following the water until the neatly plowed fields and low pastures dissolved into stands of oak, walnut, and sumac. In the white clapboard houses oatmeal left cooking on the stove didn't burn, no one was ever forced to eat spinach, and children never had dirty feet when they slipped under white sheets at night.

During haying season thunderstorms storms kept to themselves. They churned and rumbled impatiently until bales were safe inside hay lofts before unleashing their wind and rain. Things like gloves, eyeglass screwdrivers, and penny nails were always where they are needed most. In other parts of the region when summer surrendered to fall, folks had to settle for garden produce grown tough and stringy under the heavy-handed heat of late summer. But the citizens of Fox River picked tender green beans, pulled up crisp radishes, and could find enough strawberries for one last batch of jam until Labor Day.

Long after the wild blackberries that grew in thorny patches all over the region had shriveled to nothing berries in Fox River were still plump and juicy. It wasn't until some clear starry night that the first hard frost formed in the air. Wispy

and ethereal it followed the rambling curves of the river down through the valley and settled to earth where the air was still as stone. It withered pumpkin vines, blackened forgotten tomatoes, and caused chickens in the hen house to scratch deeper into their straw nests. After that even the blackberries in Fox River turned to dust.

Citizens of Fox River couldn't go beyond the boundaries of their village. Roads leading out of Fox Rover were never in the same place two days in the row. If someone tried to follow a path just to appease their curiosity it always ended at the gate on the edge of the apple orchard. Adults who attempted to open the gate was immediately swallowed up in a tangle of chokeberry and woodbine until they couldn't move. There they would be stuck until someone came and helped to free them from the snarl of vines.

When picking apples cautious mothers kept an eye on their young ones. They knew stories about little boys and girls who occasionally escaped their mothers and slipped away through the gate. Those children were never seen again—having been small enough to escape the weeds that grabbed for them. When such tragedy occurred grieving mothers and fathers stayed for weeks weeping beside the gate, begging the chokeberry to let them through.

Once a year the sky over Fox River would turn purple and the wind would hiss, then a fierce storm blew into the valley. Everyone rushed inside and watched from the safety of sturdy

houses as torrents of water poured down and wind bent the trees. By morning the river overflowed its banks and was taking away anything within reach. Piles of straw, doghouses, baskets of carrots, broken dolls, and confused ducks were seen floating away. Long underwear torn from clotheslines would be discovered clinging to fence posts as if it had been try to save itself. It was a warning to hang on to what you loved.

One spring after an especially dreadful storm, the people of Fox River went outside to discover their beloved queen was missing. Queen Ivy had curly hair and a lovely heart-shaped mouth. Everyday when she woke up a small golden apple fell from her lips and landed on ground her her feet. She collected them in the pocket of her apron then gladly gave them away to anyone she met.

On the evening of the storm she had been walking alone in the orchard and didn't hear the warnings from the sky. When the storm came it lifted her up and threw her against the gate at the back of the orchard. She closed her eyes and held on for dear life as hail, leaves, and branches went spinning through the air. Just when she thought the worst was over the gate she was clinging to swung open. In the rain and darkness a tall, dark-eyed man put a hood over her head and took her away from Fox River. The man was an evil king from the north. He took her to his castle and locked her up.

"On the day this basket is filled with golden apples I will return you to your kingdom," he said. He locked the door to her

room and stomped away.

Ivy looked out of the window but could only see a neglected garden and dying roses. She had no idea where she was.

The next day when the evil king unlocked the door the basket was still empty.

"Why is this not filled," he demanded grabbing her arm so hard that the ring he wore bit into her skin.

"I have no control over the apples."

"Then you shall be an ugly old hag before you see your home again." The king slammed the door and Ivy heard the key turning in the lock.

Molly closed the book. One would think that a mature woman could give up golden apples and magic places. But the older she got the more she was unsure. Why shouldn't such places be possible? The mythology of the world is filled with stories of people who step from one world to the next. Sometimes straddling both at the same time. Molly had asked her grandmother once why she never followed her father's direction and pushed open the gate.

"I was afraid," her grandmother whispered. "I was afraid that what he said would be true, but I was more afraid that it wouldn't."

Molly understood.

A week after Snear's sister arrived the cool fall weather abruptly halted. Instead of Dalton sliding into winter like it

did every other year, over the course of a single night spring returned. While people slept soundly without a hint of dreams, a band of warm air moved into Dalton. It melted every bit of ice that had formed across puddles and warmed the ground so much that by dawn grass had sprouted in sidewalk cracks and daffodil bulbs that had just started resting underground pushed their way to sunlight.

By midmorning perennial borders grew thick with pink foxglove and lawns needed mowing. The most lush flowers were at the Snear house. White campanula whose bell-shaped flowers seemed to have absorbed the color of the moon dripped dew from its petals. Confused students walking by thought they heard a faint ringing sound. Cinnamon fern in the backyard that hadn't grown for years suddenly found its way out from under piles of dead leaves. Along the back wall red oleander shrubs shook off their dejection and bloomed in a profusion of color. Even the tea roses had found the courage to flower and had already covered one wall.

Perhaps it was her knowledge of ancient mythology and folklore that helped Molly take the unexpected weather in stride. She took her time getting to class that day, stopping to smell purple hyacinth.

"The world is a peculiar place," she told Tom Avery as he stood by the library looking at pansies and tulips that had appeared overnight.

"I'll say," Tom replied, thinking back to Snear appearing

at the gate. "If you only knew the half of it."

"What do you mean?"

Before Tom could stop himself he told Molly about throwing apples over the gate, Snear, and the mysterious woman.

There is a fine line between belief and disbelief and it doesn't take much to loose your balance and tip toward either side. Molly knew that. As she listened to Tom's story she stepped back and was tripped by a tangle of woodbine. Her feet went out from under her and down she went. Not a great distance, just a fall to the ground. But it's not the distance that counts when head meets stone, it's the force. As Tom helped her up Molly remembered something her grandmother had once told her. *Sometimes there's nothing like a sharp blow to the head to put things in perspective.*

"You hurt," Tom Avery asked retrieving her books.

"I don't think so." Molly said brushing off her clothes.

"Stop by later and pitch a few apples for yourself."

The sun was going down and sending streaks of yellow, pink and purple across the sky when Molly got to the horticulture building. Tom was already there with a handful of apples. Molly polished one carefully on her jeans then threw it in a large arch over the gate. Like her grandmother had always said, strange unexplainable things happen all the time.

"It's was no good to argue with the forces of the universe because it would only make you crazy," Ida would say.

But when the apple broke into golden sparks, just for a

moment, Molly forgot to breath.

She took another apple and lifted the latch of the gate.

"You're not going through are you," Tom asked putting his hand on her arm.

"No, but I have an idea."

Molly rolled the apple through the opening and it disappeared.

"Things can't go over the gate, they must go through it," Tom said.

Molly nodded. Sometimes clarity is a terrible thing.

"The way my grandmother came through it as a child. But not like my mother who fell over it."

Back in Tom's kitchen Molly showed Tom her grandmother's copybook.'

"Ivy is the name of the person Snear brought through the gate." Molly said.

By the time the sun had set that night Brady Fritz was already on his third vodka sour at the Waterfall Inn.

"Fritz, Snear wanted you to stop by. Had something he wanted to talk to you about." Tom said.

"Well, I should go now. It might be important," Fritz said flustered as he straightened his tie."

"Yes, now would be best."

While Tom was at the Waterfall Molly had walked to Snear's house and quietly gone around the back. Turning the knob on the

backdoor she stepped into kitchen. She could see through the dining room into an office where Snear sat hunched over a table. Spread before him was mounds of gold coins and a chest on the floor overflowing with jewelry and coins. Such was his concentration that he didn't hear Molly as she climbed the stairs. Once she got to the first landing she took the steps two at a time to reach the third floor.

Just as she had hoped the key to Ivy's room was hanging on the wall. She took it down and slipped it into the lock. When it opened with a loud snap Snear quit counting.

"What's that I hear," he shouted.

Just as Snear started up the stairs there was a loud knock on at the door.

Molly motioned to Ivy.

"I've come to help you get home," Molly whispered.

As Ivy opened her mouth to speak a golden apple fell from her lips to the floor.

Ivy took Molly's hand and together they descended the stairs while Brady Fritz reported to Snear. When they reached the kitchen door Molly was about to breath a sigh of relief when Snear turned around and saw them.

"Come back here," he screamed and charged toward them.

"Run," Molly said to Ivy.

And so they did. Around the corner of the house, past the oleander and straight across the commons toward the gate behind the horticulture building.

"Hurry, hurry," Molly pleaded.

In the starlight Molly could see Tom holding the gate ajar. Behind them was the angry rumble of Snear as he got tangled in weeds and vines.

Molly reached the gate and pushed Ivy toward the opening.

"Go home," Molly said.

"I don't understand, how did you know?" Ivy asked.

"We have the same ancestors."

"Go now," Tom shouted as he swung the gate shut and flipped the latch down.

Ivy smiled and disappeared

Quickly Tom wound pieces of barbed-wire around the top and bottom of the gate to hold it closed against the post.

Tom and Molly jumped away from the gate at the same moment Snear tried to open it, but the wire held it shut. Snear grabbed the wire to pull it off but the barbs bit into his skin and he screamed in pain and anger.

"You can't escape me, I will have my gold."

Snear climbed to the top of the gate then jumped toward the field. But he never hit the ground, instead he exploded in a giant burst of fire. The flames that had been Snear hung in the air for a moment then fell to the ground with a hiss and growl.

Walking back to the Waterfall Brady Fritz had seen what he thought was a small meteor fall to earth out past the horticulture building. But he was thirsty so he promised himself

to look into it later. The next morning when Brady learned from campus chatter that Carlton Snear and his sister had mysteriously disappeared, he forgot about the meteor. Eventually someone from Tom Avery's staff cleared out Snear's belongings from Foxwhelp Hall and found a chest full worthless tin coins. They shook their head at the prospect that a madman had been living among all this time.

At the end of the school year Tom finally identified that sinking sensation he had whenever he saw Molly. It was the kind of thing that left you feeling as if you had fallen off the edge of the earth and wouldn't ever find your way back. He and Molly quit their teaching jobs and bought the old apple orchard that the board of trustees had decided to sell. They made sure the property included the old apple trees and the Dalton gate. They planned to put in a orchard with a variety of apple that had been in Molly's family for generations, they would be red on one side and pale gold on other. Molly had read somewhere they made good cider.

A local businessman was hired as the new president of Dalton College. He was a hospitable man with a passion for learning and a good head for business. During his first month on the job he learned the name of every student and staff on campus. He brought with him to Foxwhelp Hall his wife and a little boy they had just adopted. The child had a round face, a sweet disposition and bright red curly hair. One day as the boy

played in a third-floor bedroom he found a tiny golden apple in the corner on the floor.

Nik Reno

Nik Reno had no intention of letting anything slow her down. As she was growing up, Nicole Kamila Felicia Naudia Renauldo slowly whittled her name down to Nik Reno. Extraneous letters disappeared one-by-one over long summer vacations and short winter breaks. She kept only one letter from Kamila and eliminated the u in Renauldo just in time for her thirteenth birthday. Every letter gone was one less thing to weigh her down. Nik kept her dark hair short and never wore makeup or nail polish. She had watched girls at school take on the burdens of lipstick and eye shadow, then cry for boys who no longer wanted to kiss them. She had no intention of slowing down for anything like that.

Each fall when she went back to school she reenrolled under her newest name. By the time she graduated from Emporia High School she had a name that slid quickly around a curves and moved effortlessly past any obstacle. The constant changing of names created mayhem in the school's filing system. But letters and phone calls of complaint from the school to her parents got no response. The school eventually gave up. It was just as well. Nik Reno's mother never talked in anything above a whisper and her father spoke not at all.

The three of them, Nik decided years later, were nothing more than ghosts moving through each other's lives. Illusions made of fog, not one of them ever sure that another had crossed

their path. Her father was an insurance agent who wrote policies for farms and crops without ever stepping foot on the property. When there was a claim for something like wind or hail damage, he assessed the company's liability using newspaper articles, reports from the National Weather Service, and a fortune teller he consulted over the internet.

Her father's isolation behind the daily newspaper, cigar smoke and bourbon on the rocks allowed him to ignore the women his life. Instead he watched cartoons on a black and white television set with no sound. Nik was sure that had she stood directly in front of the set her father would have seen straight through her, equally undisturbed by either her presence or absence.

Nik's mother had been a nurse who took her education too seriously by trying endlessly to manipulate forces beyond her control. She cooked most foods on high heat and so what didn't burn disintegrated. Even things like oranges and radishes were blanched in boiling water to rid them of germs and infection. Her mother wiped their kitchen counter with a bleach solution, her hands moving in ever wider circles on the surface each night. After years and years the blue counter had given up and faded to white. Nik was certain that like the color on the counter, her mother's fingerprints had disappeared long ago too. Laundry was done with so much bleach that Nik was followed by the scent wherever she went. She started washing her own clothes soon as she was tall enough to reach the knobs on the washer.

Then she draped her shirts and jeans on the chair and dresser in her room to dry.

At sixteen Nik got a job helping the seamstress at Bella Department Store. Nik marked hem lengths, cooed over brides picking out wedding dresses, and helped squeeze fat old women into beaded evening gowns. She was taught how to string lights in window displays to create the illusion of stars for Christmas, fireworks on the fourth of July, or candlelight for Valentine's Day. Nik learned how to fit a dress to hide drooping breasts, sagging bottoms, and how to carefully pin a dress when there were bruises. She came to understand that things which are overtly conspicuous are most easily hidden. Sad marriages, deep cuts, and secret longings always looked for someplace to hide. Concealed by free makeovers, new hairdos and more jewelry, deception became not just easy but desirable.

Bella Department Store turned into Nik Reno's real home. Every day she would go to mall in the darkness of early morning. Walking past the main entrance the lights in the parking lot distorted her image and she became a blurred figure moving past the glass windows and doors. She entered through a maintenance door and listened for the voices of the cleaning crew, but she never heard them. Those ghost workers had already gone about their business cleaning bathrooms, wiping down food court tables, and straightening chairs.

Nik liked the early morning best. Later the air would become layered with too many perfume samples and crowded with

women shopping for new jeans and plaid work shirts for their husbands. In this pre-consumer moment the hum of security lights and red exit signs seemed deafening. Puddles of light unseen in day reached out from thick columns reflecting off the mirrors which rose up their sides. Light and dark patterns of shiny floor tile run straight and even like ley lines marking the passage between sacred retail temples.

Walking through the mall Nik looked through slits in the jewelry store's shuttered metal door and could see display cases draped in dark green cloth. Were the coverings a caution against thieves or a shroud for unsold dreams? Against the back wall an electronic red eye watched, ready to pounce with sound and fury on any evil it detected.

In the window of the lingerie shop headless mannequins posed for the eyes of the security cameras. Nik put her palm against the window to feel the smooth coolness of its surface. Beyond her hand, bits of nylon, silk, and lace covered plastic flesh with a perfect fit. The models paused, halted in mid-motion from their never-ending undulating dance. Several perfume bottles lined the window, all containing love, desire, and happiness. Nik had tried them one by one, spraying samples on her wrists and neck, but the only thing she ever smelled was the chlorine.

Next door a talking kiosk at a vitamin shop awakened and started spewing questions at her.

Have you checked your weight today?

How do you know if you're getting enough calcium?

Are your vitamins fresh?

The questions remind Nik of her antiseptic mother, they were the kind she asked instead of, "Nik, did you have a good day?"

Sometimes when she came home from work or school, Nik would find her mother sitting at the kitchen table cutting a photograph of Nik's father into increasingly smaller pieces. Her mother would sweep the pieces back into their envelope without a word. Nik never asked her mother what she was doing because she knew. By the time she got out of high school the sadness in her mother's brain had turned to cancer and soon, like the photograph, there was nothing recognizable left.

One August day shortly after her mother's funeral, Nik moved into her own apartment just across the street from the mall. She left her father without as word as he sat behind his newspaper. A goodbye would have been just one more thing to slow her down.

It was well after midnight when Sebastian Bonaventure Humphrey arrived in Emporia. He emerged from an air-conditioned Greyhound bus into the steamy Kansas night. The air was so oppressive that striped Tom cats with empty stomachs and owls with starving chicks had given up the hunt hours ago. They now rested under porches or in the shadowy branches of oak trees. The hunters dreamed fitfully, praying for a sudden downpour, an earthquake,

a volcano, anything that would drive mice insane and force them out of hiding. Even moths that usually fluttered in a never ending dance around humming street lights were stuck motionless in the thick air. Most of the insects had already died in their struggle toward the light but wouldn't fall to the ground until dawn.

Sebastian was a sail maker. He had muscled hands and wide fingers flat from coaxing yards of nylon sail cloth to become main sails, jib sheets and spinnakers. Calluses on his fingertips had been earned by steering thick needles through difficult tasks and were the only reference he needed when applying for jobs. Sometimes at night when he fell asleep he could hear wind against sail as he dreamed of a place where cold weather wouldn't halt his work, leaving him nothing but memories of sails snapping in the wind until the ice melted. When he couldn't find work making sails he made kites to support himself. His kites were too clever to get caught in power lines or tops of trees. They knew how to snag bits of clouds and bring stray sunbeams back to earth.

After midnight tonight, when he was the only passenger left the bus, the driver had asked to see his ticket. The stub showed he had been a stowaway for hours—ever since Des Moines. So Sebastian was booted off the bus, his luggage and other belongings unceremoniously dumped on the sidewalk beside him in Emporia. Before he could turn around the bus had groaned away into the night. Its tail lights swallowed by a haze of humidity

and the dust from wheat fields that stretched out to the horizon in every direction.

Pushing his straw-colored hair straight back from his forehead he slung a lemon yellow duffle bag stuffed with a rainbow of various sailcloth over his back, grasped a heavy black tool case in the other and started walking through town.

"Hello! Hello!" Sebastian boomed. His words bounded down the empty streets without disturbing weeds that grew between the cracks in the cement or discarded soda cans. While some people get through life by following their nose, Sebastian was guided by his voice. Whenever he spoke his words became colored letters running out before him like a trail. They tumbled end-over-end bumping against each other as they went, sometimes even making up new words of their own just to pass the time. When they'd had enough they would disappear with a pop and sigh.

On one block he stopped to look in the window of an art store. It wasn't a real art gallery, but a print and reproduction frame-your-grandmother's-lace-apron store. To this shop the immortally hopeful brought cherished trinkets to be corralled by a wood frame, cardboard backing, and a square of glass guaranteed to protect against fading for eternity. The frames were a perfect cenotaph, a gilded tomb to honor a body that would never occupy it. In the window of the store hung several paintings. In one giant escalators rose up from breakers in the sea until they touched the clouds. In another frame city streets were crowded with cars running between rows of pews in a

cathedral. In yet another, swans floated in the liquid of stone floors. And in the last, time travelers walked on the air wake left by jets. Sebastian imagined himself walking through the air and water wakes in these paintings. He would ride the escalator to the top or follow the time travelers to find what kind of world was contained within their respective frames.

Sebastian spoke the story of *Sinbad the Sailor* to the night air until his words about flying carpets and merchant ships bumped up against a door with the words *Bella Department Store* printed on it in gold letters. The words from his voice started piling up in a corner and refused to go another step. No matter, he knew that one can only go as far in a day as his words would take him, so he sat down on the concrete and rested against his duffle bag. He closed his eyes and began dreaming of skimming over an endless sea. But he wasn't on an ocean with the spray of water against his cheek. He was skimming over the top of wheat fields breaking a path through a crop as golden as the sun. As he went he left a giant spray of grain in his wake.

Nik Reno was walking to work when she found him. Sebastian's head rested on the yellow duffle bag and his arms were comfortably crossed over his chest. When she bent over to get a closer look, the deep breathing of his sleep sounded like water purling between stones. Her heart skipped a beat, the very first one it had ever missed in her entire life. Nik nudged his foot with hers.

"Wake up. You can't sleep here," she said.

He stood up and stretched his arms to the sky.

"I don't know why not," Sebastian's voice filled the air around her. To his surprise the words that fell from his lips clustered around the feet of Nik Reno and lodged themselves in the eyelets of her tennis shoes.

Suddenly Nik herself couldn't think of any good reason not to sleep on concrete. She invited him into her workroom in the store, giving him hot coffee and yesterday's donuts at the cluttered table in the center of the room.

All around were kites in various stages of construction. Red nylon diamond kites missing bows, flat blue silk triangles without tails, and orange box kites missing a panel. While he ate she explained her work and Bella's kite contest. When he recounted why she had found him sleeping by the store his words flitted around the room under tables and behind mannequins inspecting every square inch of the room. Eventually they filtered up to the ceiling and huddled in a corner talking among themselves.

"I can help you," Sebastian said already opening his tool case. Throughout the day he worked finishing the kites on the table and making new ones of his own design. As he worked he talked to her, to the kites, to no one at all. But as he uttered his words they piled up on the floor until they were ankle deep and he had to kick them out of the way to get to move around.

The kites Sebastian made looked as if they might float away with nothing more than the force of a sneeze. Nik went in and

out of the workroom all day setting up the displays in the store. Each time she came back into the room she found one more excuse to linger there and watch him work. His voice slowed her down and made her feel like she was walking against water up to her waist. At last she realized there was a smell in the room that had never been in this room or in Emporia before. It was the smell of sea oats and saltwater rain.

When the kites had been placed around the store, Nik came back to the workroom and took her time tidying up. Sebastian slowly put his tools away. As they were getting ready to leave he couldn't help but notice that all of the words he had spoken that day came and hovered around her like bees over a beehive.

"Come here, I have something to show you," Sebastian motioning her out of the building and into the deserted parking lot. An easy wind with a sense of purpose came from the west and ruffled the edges of the night. Under his arm Sebastian had something long rolled up. On the pavement he unfurled a diamond kite twice his height and carefully inserted the struts and bow. Then he tied on a tail that appeared to be made from bits of gold silk and comet dust. When Sebastian set it up on end, Nik could look up and see stars through the translucent material.

"Will it fly?" Nik asked.

"No. It will sail."

Sebastian grasped the cord of the kite in his left hand and placed his right arm around her waist and pulled her close. With his body pressed against hers she could feel the kite tugging at

them, drawing them away from the earth. It was struggling toward the sky, trying to follow wisps of silver clouds and invisible currents of air.

"Hang on," he whispered in her ear. And she did.

Marshland

Like her mother and grandmother Claire Dupre had been born with flaming red hair that grew in a mass of waves around her face. Her skin had the soft sweet scent of beeswax and her smokey black eyes disturbed anyone with an ounce of sense because she had an unsettling stare. When she looked at a person it was as if she could look into you and after seeing your hopes and dreams she might change them to something altogether different. It was a well known fact that any man who looked into the eyes of a Dupre women for more than a minute never felt the same again and didn't want to.

Men who married Dupre woman took their name. It was a small tradeoff for spending their life with a woman who wrapped her arms around you and walked into your dreams each night. Single men passing Claire on the sidewalk would suddenly find they had a hard time breathing and be forced to look away. Even on cool days they would have to stop in the nearest drugstore to get cold soda or ice water to drink. Wives worried their husbands might look into Claire's eyes and become trapped. Gut they need not have been troubled, Claire never paid any attention to them. She had no time for someone so unstable they lost their minds at the first sight of a beautiful women. Any man Claire would be interested in would meet her gaze head on and not be a bit afraid to hang on forever.

Like her all the women in her family, Claire had two

remarkable abilities. The first was the talent to see in the dark. This was one of the reasons Estelle Dupre, one of the original settlers in Middlebury had been able to survive that first terrible winter. When the sun went down Estelle went right on with her work, doing more in one day than most folks did in two. Anyone watching from across the river saw her gray figure moving around the marsh and weaving between pine trees. The second gift was the ability to find lost objects by touching the hand of the person who was searching. It didn't matter what the item was, a wandering lover, lost child, misplaced money, or a forgotten poem.

Ever since that first winter Dupre women had been blamed for everything that went wrong in the village. If a cow dropped dead in a pasture, a barn burned down, or a child fell sick with fever, everyone believed Dupre women had a hand in it. It didn't matter if some feebleminded cow ate hemlock or a careless farmer knocked over a lantern in his own barn or a child caught pneumonia from wading in the Sage River. Anytime there was a speck of misfortune the citizens of Middlebury whispered to each that they knew who was at fault.

No matter what cruel words about Dupres were exchanged between Middlebury citizens in the light of day, after dark these same people crossed the natural stone bridge to the Dupre house. They came in search of all manner of things: Aunt Edith's silver locket, the heart of a lost lover, lock of hair from a dead child, a misplaced recipe for butter biscuits, or a

favorite hairpin. A man or woman crazy with longing was happy to trade a bolt of blue silk, lace ribbons, or a shovel with a new oak handle to regain what had left them. But not all things that stray want to be found again. Time and again Dupre women tried to make their neighbors understand that. Some of them became angry when the bauble or lover they'd just recovered slipped through their fingers a second time. There was no way to make them see that some things are better off gone.

Robert and Estelle Dupre had sailed on a ship from England creaking with the weight of people, horses, cattle, and filled to the gunwales with both hope and fear. Robert had married Estelle because he was bewitched by her red hair, and lips the same dark red as the cranberries he loved. He didn't mind that at night while they slept she wandered into his dreams and shared them with him. Together they dreamed of cranberry marshes thick with fruit and gallons of cranberry honey. In the morning when they woke they could hear bees buzzing over their heads.

When the settlers reached what would become Middlebury, the land divided by the narrow Sage River was two different worlds. A string of large flat rocks sticking out of the river made a stone bridge across the water. On the west side the river bank was high and well beyond any danger of flooding. The rich black soil made promises of chest-high oats and enough corn and grass to last through long New England winters. Young boys hunting squirrels and rabbits could get enough meat for dinner by midmorning. Then they could be set to work building barns or

stringing fences for the rest of the day.

The sandy sweep of soil on the east side of the river was a different story. Dotted with peat moss bogs that shifted with the mood of the water, it was littered with scrub pine, cattails, and thick with wild cranberry vines. On moonless nights mysterious green lights flickered through the underbrush causing a ribbon of fear to run across the heart of anyone watching. Truth Blackstone proclaimed the unearthly luminescence was a warning to stay away.

But the land itself should have been warning enough. Rocks that looked like they were on solid ground sunk knee-deep in murky water when stepped on. Cockleburs stuck to clothing and chokecherry plants reached for ankles causing the walker to stumble and fall. As soon as spring arrived thick clouds of honeybees hovered over white blossoms of bloodroot and yellow waterbuttons. Anyone, except Estelle, who dared reach into a dead tree stump to steal honey was stung so badly his eyes swelled shut and he had to be helped home. But Estelle could reach in up to her elbow while bees flew out and vibrated over her head at a respectful distance. It seemed the marsh was only suitable for wild rice, rabbits, and the duckgrass growing beside the water. Instead of taking land that would grow corn and cabbage, oats, and turnips, Robert and Estelle crossed the Sage River and claimed the watery shifting soil that Truth Blackstone predicted would be the death of them both.

Dupres built a small house with a peaked roof and loft.

Instead of putting a bed in the loft they built a bee hive and cut a hole the size of Estelle's thumb in the wall up near the roof for the creatures to enter. It wasn't long before a ribbon of bees flew through the hole to their new home. Outside Robert dug narrow ditches from the river inland to frame patches of marshland. Using pine branches lashed together with cane grass he and Estelle built dams and fitted them into the ditches to control the flow of water to the cranberry beds. Estelle transplanted cranberry vines from the marshes into rows in their bogs. She would scoop them up roots and all and bring them back in a basket. As she cultivated the plants clouds of honeybees followed her followed her as if in anticipation of the blossoms to come. When she rested quietly for a moment they would land on her arm and proceed to clean their wings, as if at home in their own hive. Sometimes she would ask them for honey. The hive would become quiet and Estelle would reach in with spoon to scoop out just enough for supper. Bees are no different than anyone else and appreciate it when you show them kindness and respect. Each night Estelle would sing the bees to sleep with a song that spoke of meadows thick with flowers and sunlight so bright it sparkled.

When Robert and Estelle went to bed they held each other tight and dreamed of blood-red juice so tart it puckered their mouths while they slept. Their dreams mingled with those of the bees and soon the night air was filled with the smell of delicate white blossoms and honey. As the night deepened the hum

of the bees grew louder until the sound drifted across the river and woke Truth Blackstone out of a frightening dream she had been having of the devil.

Cranberries are plump red oval berries that burst with a pop when squeezed. Put a raw one in your mouth and it's unlikely you'll ever do it again. The taste is so sour it constricts your throat and suddenly lemons seem sweet. Cooked with plenty of honey and served warm the delicious red compote slides easily down your throat and makes you want more. Just one spoonful can make the saddest person giddy. Cranberry juice will stain hands and lips and it never wears off. Claire's mother had told her that her great-great-grandmother, Pearl, who had been born at harvest time had come out of the womb with pink fingertips and cranberry juice on her lips.

Besides selling fresh cranberries, cranberry compote, and cranberry jelly, each year Claire took part of her harvest and cooked the berries until there was nothing left but juice. Then she strained it creating a dye that would turn any cloth blood red. She sold the dye for a very handsome price to hand weavers, people interested in something that would last forever. She wondered what Estelle would think about the success of the business she had started. In her time Estelle had attempted to trade cranberries for deer hide, cloth, and shoes but everyone thought the fruit a foolish luxury. They only wanted honey and the beeswax candles she made.

Claire made beeswax candles the same way that Estelle had

all those years ago, by melting the wax then straining it through a cloth. Then she carefully dipped the cotton wicks building up layer after layer of wax until she had a proper candle. Like Estelle, Claire's house had a tall peaked roof with a loft on which the hives were kept. The bees darted about the room inspecting her work and filling the air with a soft gold light.

Perhaps it was mosquitos, a poisonous snake, or a shooting star, but Robert Dupre didn't live to see the first snowfall in Middlebury. His body was consumed by a sickness that couldn't be stopped by feverfew tea, offerings to the moon, or Estelle's love. After he died Estelle cried for three days, her tears running in rivulets out of the house and down to the river. She cried so much it flooded the ground and when it finally dried there was a crust of salt beneath her feet. The only reason she had stopped crying at all was because she had felt something move in her belly. In one single moment she put aside her past and focused on the future inside her.

Middlebury, most inhabitants liked to think, was a town built in the sight of the lord. A place watchful of temptation, sin, and the workings of the devil. Truth Blackstone had come to Middlebury with her grown son, Peter. She was a dour woman who wore black caps and boasted the only book she ever read was the bible. Peter told his friends how he knelt on the rough wood floor of their home each night and read passages from the bible. Although a more kind or obedient son than Peter could never be

found, Truth would slap him across the shoulders with a hickory switch if he stumbled over the words and command him to mend his evil ways.

Truth was blind in one eye yet claimed she could see the devil at work across the river.

"It's unnatural, a woman living alone like that," Truth would whisper to Lottie Taylor.

"She doesn't have a normal garden," Agnes Hanover said disapprovingly. This was true. Estelle hadn't wasted her time planting corn or beans or cabbage on wet sandy soil. Instead she took advantage of what the land gave freely. She gathered wild rice and onions, ramps, walnuts, wood sorrel, and burdock root to clear the blood. She exchanged honey, candles, and her sight of lost things for things like flour, salt, potatoes, and carrots. And throughout the months while her belly grew larger she collected enough dry firewood to last all winter.

"Just wait until time for her to birth that baby, she'll be coming around begging for help then," Truth said.

Estelle overhead the uncharitable words spoken about her but she paid no attention. She kept to her bees which by now had become so attached to her that she couldn't go outside without them following her. One day when she was at the river getting water when they swarmed and stung a snake to death that had been about to bite her.

One fall day Estelle crossed the river carrying a bundle on her back. Her child had been born, a chubby-faced daughter with

the same hair and eyes as her mother.

Instead of celebrating baby Rose, the first child born in Middlebury, there was talk that Estelle was a witch. A woman in consort with the devil.

"Mark my words, wickedness lives in that one," Truth said while Lottie and Agnes nodded in agreement.

Not all bitterness in the world is born of evil. That first first winter, before all the leaves had fallen from the sumac and before squirrels had filled their nests with hickory nuts, a freezing rain covered the ground. Men and their sons were forced to finish harvesting corn by sliding around on the ground pulling a bushel basket behind them. It was too slippery to risk breaking a horse's neck. After that a heavy snow fell and narrow paths were dug between house and barn. People stayed inside their houses afraid to go out for fear they would lose their way and never get home again. By the time the calendar turned to the new year the Sage River had frozen all the way to bottom killing trout and smothering turtles who had thought they were safe in the mud until spring.

Throughout the bleak winter Estelle stayed in her house nursing Rose and putting shallow dishes of watered down honey in the loft for the bees. If Rose woke in the night and Estelle didn't hear her, one of the bees would buzz at her ear until she woke up. It was on one of those nights, a clear and bitterly cold night, that Estelle started to feel a sick uneasiness. Although Rose went peacefully back to sleep in her cradle after

having some milk and honey, the bees refused to settle down. They buzzed and dived around Estelle's head until one of the finally stung her on the cheek.

When she stepped outside to get a handful of snow to put on her face, she looked across the Sage River and saw something terrible. Through the darkness Estelle could see pain and weakness. It hovered over the houses in dark purple clouds and slid under doors and windows. It filled the air with the stench of smoke making it hard for Estelle to take a breath. She could see that the children had monsters chasing them through their dreams, terrifying them while they slept. But the adults dreamt not at all, theirs was a cold sleep from which they might not awaken. Estelle saw that the citizens of Middlebury were being overcome with something dreadful they didn't understand.

Estelle filled a pot with dried cranberries and honey and cooked them until they were soft and sweet. She put her baby on her back and crossed the frozen river with the steaming kettle. Knocking on doors in the middle of the night with her long red hair and dark eyes she was a frightening apparition to those delirious from the severe lack of vitamin C. Lottie and Silas Taylor had to be told twice before they understood to eat the cranberry mixture, their hands shaking so badly they could barely get the spoons to their mouths. Estelle went house-to-house, Franklins, Taylors, Hanovers, Potiers, Sackets. At each one she was greeted by pale faces with eyes so sunken in they could easily have been mistaken for corpses. Estelle told those

well enough to understand that they must feed the tart medicine to the sick every few hours and be sure to eat some themselves.

By dawn Estelle had reached the Blackstones. Knocking on their door she was greeted by Peter Blackstone, a young man far closer to death then to life. Estelle made him lie down and held his head while she spooned the sauce into his mouth. He reached out to her and tried to squeeze her hand.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Like all the others, Truth had black and blue marks on her body and was hemorrhaging from her nose. Truth had scurvy so bad her teeth were falling out—her gums having become soft and spongy like the bogs where the cranberries grew. Superstitious people might say that Truth's teeth fell out not because of scurvy but because of her caustic thoughts and words. Malignant words that invoke heaven were bound to finally ooze out someplace.

By the time robins returned in April the folks of Middlebury had recovered. Estelle no longer made daily trips across the river bringing cranberries and comfort. Men talked about planting and putting additions on their barns. Women who a short time ago couldn't get out of bed baked bread and planned gardens. In the bright air of spring, the promise of new colts, and longer days, no one remembered Estelle Dupre had chased a demon out of their midst. Truth Blackstone had been worst off and the last to fully recover, it taking a long time for her teeth to become solid in her mouth again. But when she did get

well she never spoke of Estelle except to say that something was wrong with anyone who didn't get themselves to church on Sunday.

But sometimes a kindness done in the face of rejection is too much to bear. Aside from Peter Blackstone's whispered appreciation, no one else in Middlebury bothered to bring a loaf of bread, an embroidered handkerchief, or a word of gratitude to Estelle for having saved their lives. Although she never saw him, and he never exchanged any other word with her, for the rest of Estelle's life, Peter looked after her as best he could. She would find gifts of flour, salt, and sugar left beside her door. Broken tools were repaired and put back in her shed.

It stuck in their throats of all the others that the one they had ignored and been unkind to had hovered over their death beds and brought them back to life. An act of charity in the midst of cruelty just couldn't be forgiven. Instead of being grateful, they resented Estelle Dupre's generous nature even more than her red hair and dark eyes. Their hearts became frozen, as hard and as deep as the Sage River that winter.

Any stranger arriving in Middlebury in modern times couldn't help but notice what a tidy village it was. Rust didn't grow on the hinges of gates, doors or the chains on children's swings. Manicured lawns ran in front of freshly painted homes and sidewalks wouldn't dare have cracks. People on their way to church looked both ways before crossing streets bathed in lemon-colored sunlight. Children put on their mittens without being told and never ran ahead of their parents when walking. Loose

porch boards were nailed back down the moment someone noticed them and dead leaves falling from trees collected neatly in a pile. Even the stars seemed to be evenly spread across the sky at night. Cellars were filled with canned tomatoes, applesauce, green beans, and enough goodwill to aid a neighbor that had been improvident. Troublesome matters such as broken hearts, unrealized dreams, and scary secrets were kept in little boxes behind the pickled beets and pears.

An observant stranger would also have noticed that in spite of the library addition, a new city hall, and updated street lights, attitudes and superstitions in Middlebury were still inherited from parents and grandparents just they'd always been. Sour grudges were passed down to subsequent generations along with farmland, pocket watches, and grandmother's ivory wedding gown. Hundreds of years after that first terrible winter the Dupres were still held at arm's length, treated no differently than disgraced cousins or suspicious strangers. The result of that animosity was such that anytime a Dupre women set foot on the west side of the Sage River she got a bitter taste in her mouth. Even today when Claire was buying cotton balls or greeting cards at the drugstore a venomous taste would creep over her tongue like smoke sliding under a door. The only thing that cured it was returning to her own home and eating a teaspoon of honey.

This was all despite the fact everyone knew Dupre cranberries were the only thing that could keep a person healthy

through long New England winters. Each autumn during the Founder's Day celebration Dupre Cranberry Company sold out of raw berries, cranberry sauce, cranberry honey, and Claire's beeswax candles. But Claire, nor her mother or grandmothers while they were alive, had ever invited to be part of the parade or asked to contribute artifacts for the museum. This year the museum was being moved into the old ice house across the river from Claire's and no one had even asked her for a donation.

Aaron Taylor, president of the city council, was still congratulating himself that he had been lucky enough to get Lee Blackstone, a descendant of Peter Blackstone to be curator of the new museum.

"He even sort of looks like Peter Blackstone," Aaron told Matt Franklin the Chief of Police, motioning to the portrait.

Lee Blackstone knew the universe was ruled by accidents and chance meetings. He was personally acquainted with the twists of fate that turned things inside out. When his father was young and foolish he had run away from both the confines and protection of his family in Middlebury. He married a girl that drank too much and drove too fast. When Lee was three years old, a car accident took their lives and left him alone. Although he had been at home tucked in bed, with a babysitter watching television in the living room, Lee knew the instant they died because he saw the fire and screaming in his dreams. Loneliness is a rock that sinks your soul most times and made worse even

when someone you love disappears out of your life without a moments notice or a word of goodbye.

"He's too young too remember them anyway," a policeman said touching Lee's brown hair. By the time Lee's parents had died there weren't any Blackstones left in Middlebury. There was no one left that would take a little boy and give him both a past and present. Authorities placed Lee in an orphanage clutching a blue blanket and a teddy bear. He took with him a frozen spot in his chest originally intended to hold the memories of other people in your life. As he grew up he became adept in keeping people at safe distances.

All along he was careful not to become attached because he was reminded everyday that not everyone gets to love. Boys and girls he came to like in the orphanage were adopted or moved away. A favorite teacher would take another job. Even the gray tabby cat that caught mice in the basement of the orphanage disappeared one day. In college girls that pressed themselves against him and tried to get him to come in were never called again. After he graduated the only women he dated were uncomfortable under his direct gaze and squirmed in their seats until he took them home.

Lee's understanding of the way fate works made it easy for Howard Muir, his supervisor at the state museum, to let him go because of funding cuts. Standing outside Muir's office after he'd been fired, Lee began to think that perhaps he was lost. Maybe his path, if he had one, was as unknown to the universe as

it was to him. The river and bumblebees that ran lazily through his childhood dreams and the milkweed seed that drifted skyward from the vacant lot beside his apartment had more purpose.

When a man named Aaron Taylor from Middlebury called and asked Lee to come to Middlebury to interview for the position of curator of the new Middlebury museum, Lee reluctantly agreed to go. He wasn't sure he wanted to open up a wound that had scarred over years ago. When he arrived he parked in the old ice house parking and got out to wait for Aaron. As he stood looking east across the Sage River to Dupre Cranberry Company Lee realized he was looking at the landscape he had been dreaming of all his life.

"Of course the pay isn't much," Aaron warned him later as they stood in what would be the main exhibit hall.

"It will be fine," Lee said.

"Want to see a picture of your ancestor?" Aaron pointed to the framed portrait of Peter Blackstone.

Lee stared. He was looking at himself at an older age. Suddenly he felt a peculiar sensation. It was the curious feeling of growing roots. The sensation was so real he had to resist lifting up his shoes to see if he still could. Until just a moment ago he had been blowing and drifting around like a feather tumbling through the sky to nowhere. Now he was stuck in one spot and wasn't sure if he could ever move again or if he even wanted to.

Late that night after Lee Blackstone had settled into his

tiny apartment in the old ice house, he fell back on his bed and started to dream. Swarms of bees were coming across the river followed by a red-haired woman who carried a lit candle in each hand. The bees brushed past his face and when he licked his lips in his sleep they tasted sweet like honey.

It was in the deep of that night while the people of Middlebury were dreaming their sweetest dreams that Odell Griffin arrived. He had come from the first hard frost of fall. His body crystalizing from the same air that created thin patches of ice in the cane grass and duckweed along the river. It was the kind of night when smoke from wood stoves hovered over the houses of Middlebury like ghosts. Children whose soft blankets had slipped to the floor cried out in their sleep and cats slinking through the weeds in search of mice stopped to hiss at the orange halo around the moon.

By morning when fog rose over the river a large tent had risen beside the ice house in the same spot river oaks bowed over the water like thirsty old men. The gray canvas was the same color of winter storm clouds and when the sides flapped in the wind bits of frost flew into the air. In the predawn air white light seeped from under the sides of the tent and made the dead grass hugging the ground look blurry. Flashing red and gold lights outlined a signboard that read, *Memories for Sale! One Day Only!* The sign rotated high above the tent supported by an irate dust devil stolen from a wheat field in Kansas, its tail tied to the trunk of a nearby tree.

Odell had visited here a long time ago. His sulfurous breath had fallen on every person this side of the river. Back them his work had been frustrated by a woman who bore no malice in her heart. But that one was long dead he knew. The season, now as in the past, was cold and the sky so heartless it made old men tremble just to look up. Despite his pale smooth skin and ice blue eyes, Odell smelled of smoke and ashes. He abhorred warmth, sunshine, and and all forms of fire unless it came from lightening. He preferred cold overcast days and wind that howled around the corners of barns or whistled across barren fields. Odell sat in his tent on a piece of gray fog waiting for daylight to bring his customers. They would be, he knew, those who had forgotten that contributions to the collection plate is not where redemption lies.

By the time Claire finished her breakfast and was at work making candles, Marjorie Franklin had braved the cold miserable day and was in Odell's tent. Her husband Stan had left her when Matt was just a baby. She had scrimped and saved to raise him and was proud her son had grown to be a respected member of the Middlebury police force. But lately she had been noticing her gray hair and the wrinkles on her hands. In her whole long life she had never been out of the state, so she was here to buy a memory.

"How much for one of Venice? I want one gliding through the canals. One that visits the Bridge of Sighs and the Palazzo Ducale."

"That's quite a large memory, one of my most expensive models," Odell said stroking the frost that had formed along his eyebrows.

"I'll pay anything," Marjorie said hoping she had brought enough money.

But it wasn't money Odell was wanting in exchange for manufactured memories, he wanted some of Marjorie's real memories. In exchange for Venice he would take the memory of her first kiss, the happiness she felt with Matt's first step, and the sound of her grandfather playing a violin.

"They're small things really, you'll never miss them."

Odell held out his ice-cold palms to Marjorie and as she placed her hands in his she started to shiver and was sure she smelled smoke. In a moment it was over and Marjorie remembered how it felt to ride a gondola through Venice.

After Marjorie came a steady stream of others eager to trade old memories for experiences and people they had never expected to know. Old Lady Sacket, who had one ear a bit higher than the other, traded the memory of her mother's last embrace and the smell of warm bread for one of her winning a beauty contest in high school. The Cormier boys who ran the hardware store swapped their recollections of fishing and hunting with their father for memories of driving a race car and being a famous singer. Pastor Vincent from the Lutheran Church traded the sound of willows in the wind and the feel of winter's first snow on his face for one of preaching to a congregation of

thousands.

But Odell hadn't bothered to warn anyone of the possible side effects of losing one's own memories. Paths that had once been familiar might now take on a unfamiliar quality. Without the memory of wind blowing through trees, knowledge of a river, or music played by a loved one, it can be easy to loose your way. On the way home Old Lady Sacket stumbled twice and Pastor Vincent wandered blocks out of his way, uncertain which was the right road home. By the time Marjorie Franklin had gotten home she was in tears. She knew that once she had a lovely time in Venice, but she couldn't remember with who. And there were other important things she had forgotten, like what instrument her grandfather had played and where she was the day her son started walking.

When Lee woke that morning the portrait of Peter Blackstone was leaning against the wall studying at him. They both had the same dark eyes and long nose. Although Peter and his descendants were dust in a grave, absorbed into the soil of the earth hundreds of years before Lee was born, they seemed closer to him than any living person he knew. After breakfast he spent hours poking through the boxes of papers and artifacts he was now responsible for. He started thinking about how certain items could be arranged and what things school children might be interested in. At last he came across what he had been searching for. A list of the original Middlebury families. There was Truth Blackstone, age 44, and Peter Blackstone, age 23. Next came

David and Myra Cormier, then another family name he recognized, Robert and Estelle Dupre.

When Lee left the ice house he saw Odell's sign spinning in the air but paid no attention. He was in a hurry to cross the river because the sky was growing restless, as if it might snow and rain and hail all at the same time. Lee Blackstone had no idea that as he walked the stone bridge to Dupre Cranberry Company that he was about to be captured by a witch.

Claire had been up before dawn, awakened by bees diving past her head and a dream in which Estelle Dupre tugged at her sleeve and pointed across the river to Middlebury. When she looked out the window toward town she saw a layer of purple clouds hovering over the tent and was filled with apprehension.

Claire was tying candles into pairs with crimson ribbon when Lee knocked on the door. All morning long the bees had been restless and agitated but with the tapping on the door they flew to the ceiling and hung there in a shimmering mass.

"Hold on," Claire called out. The sound of her voice made Lee feel dizzy, like he was spinning round and round. He forget his last name and had to open his wallet to check his license.

When Claire swung open the door he looked into her eyes and found he couldn't look away. Not that he ever wanted to, not ever again. He wanted to stay right there looking into Claire's dark eyes, catching the glint of light from her red hair, and breathing in the smell of honey. In college he had read an old English manuscript that said this is how a witch captures you.

She looks into your eyes until you go crazy, then steals the heart right out of your chest. Lee is sure that this is exactly what is happening right now, but he doesn't care. The frozen lump he has carried around all his life has suddenly melted and was making his shirt damp.

"Can I help you?" Claire asked. Her hair hadn't been brushed all day and she wore an old blue work shirt that fell to her knees.

"I'm Lee Blackstone. Aaron Taylor hired me as the curator of the museum. Dupres are one of the founding families and I'm wondering if we can talk?"

Claire pushed her hair back with her fingers and let him in. She couldn't believe the way he man was staring at her right here in her own doorway. He was looking at her as if she were the only woman in the world. Suddenly the room felt hot and stuffy, as if the candles she made today had already been set alight.

Lee sat for hours asking Claire questions about Middlebury, her ancestors, the cranberry business, and what she knew about other families in town. He kept asking questions because he didn't want to leave and she kept making raspberry tea and answering them because she wanted him to stay. When the sky outside the windows had turned black Lee remembered he would have to cross the stone bridge to go home.

"I'll walk you back," Claire said lighting a lantern that contained a pair of her candles. The bees had been minding their

own business but now they darted out the door in front Claire and Lee. They headed straight across the river, giving off enough light that Claire could see the glint of their bodies in the dark. As Claire followed in the darkness she gasped. What had been hidden to her eyes during the day as now clear. A thick poisonous fog had grown up between the houses of Middlebury. Soon the sickness it represented would be beyond the power of holy water, stone circles, or spells written in the sand to cure.

Claire took a box of candles, her lantern and started across the river. Lee followed the sound of the bees and the scent of honey all the while thinking it is amazing the places love will take you. Once across the river they crept toward Odell's tent. The sign above it still twisted in the dark throwing sparks of red and gold light into the night. But the light inside the tent had turned from white to sickly green and was oozing out in puddle by the door. Claire wedged candles in the ground next to each tent stake then lit them. Bees ringed the tent and fanned the air around the flames sending the heat of the candles toward the tent.

Soon water began dripping down the sides and the roof began to thin and sag. The entire tent had taken on an opaque quality before Odell ran screeching out the front, the smell of smoke following him. Even before Claire threw the lantern at him, his face had begun to melt and his fingers had started to dissolve. As the flame from the lantern rose up, the bees surrounded him

creating a circle of warm air with their wings. Lee learned that night that even water can scream if it has been treated badly enough. As Odell melted the memories he had captured drifted off in the night wind to seek their rightful owner. It would be easy for them to find where they belonged because the spot they had been snatched from was still hollow and waiting to be filled.

The next day the people of Middlebury couldn't remember a cold evil man named Odell Griffin or a giant tent made of frost and fog. The only thing left of him was a small bit of green ice that would soon be melted. The rest had already run into the Sage River and been taken downstream. At the hardware store customers asked the Cormier boys for advice on hunting and fishing because they had done a great deal of it with their father as boys. Old Lady Sacket surprised her grandchildren by getting her ears pierced and Marjorie Hamilton starting making Italian food. Pretty soon she was famous in Middlebury for her spaghetti with spicy sausage. But the most surprising thing was that the people of Middlebury started talking about the monument that would be built to Estelle Dupre on the site of the new museum. They spoke of it as if it had been something they planned on all along. When Lee Blackstone got up that morning he saw there was only one thing left to do. He untied the dust devil from the tree by the river and sent it spinning off toward home.